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THE MAGAZINE OF

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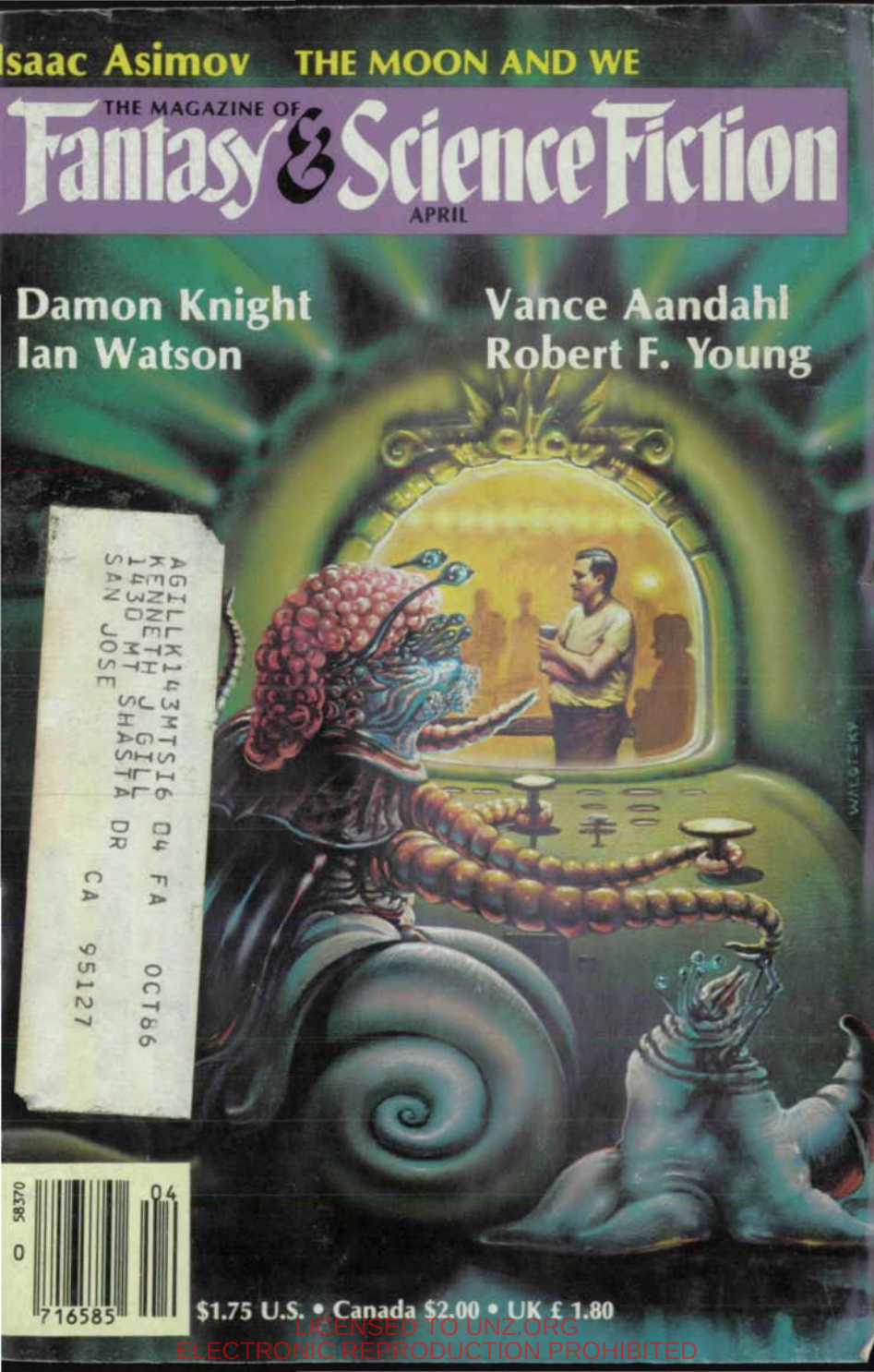

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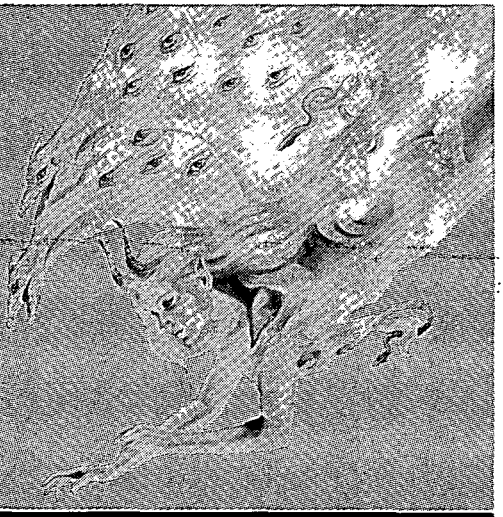

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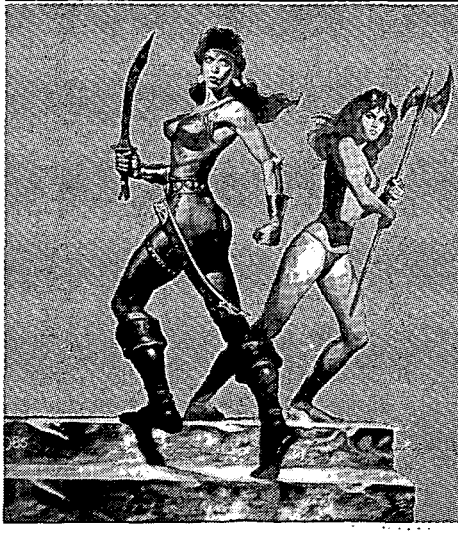

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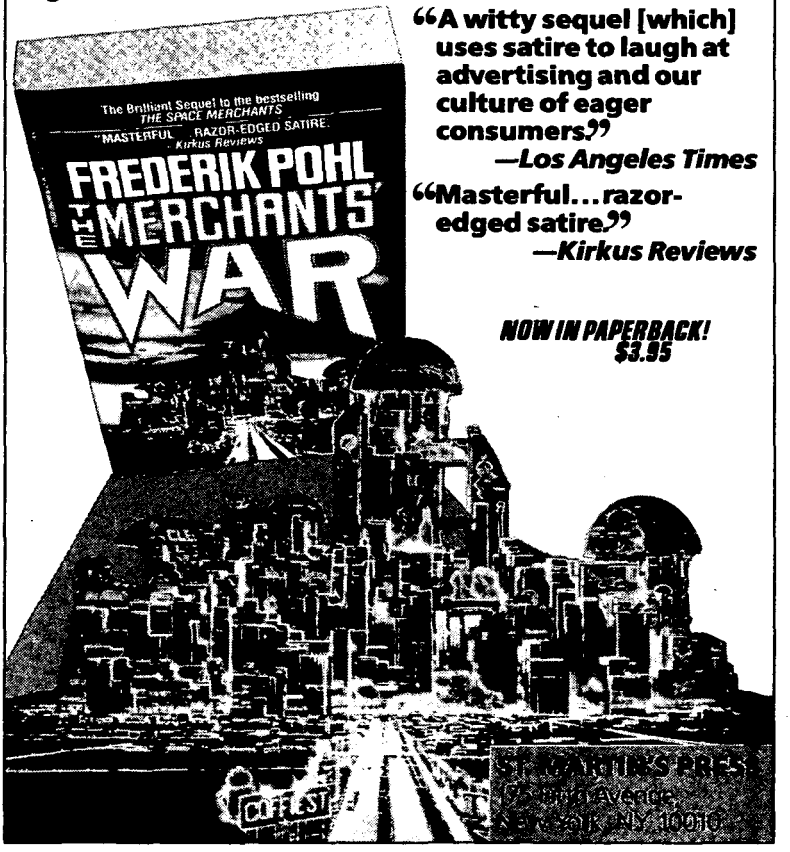

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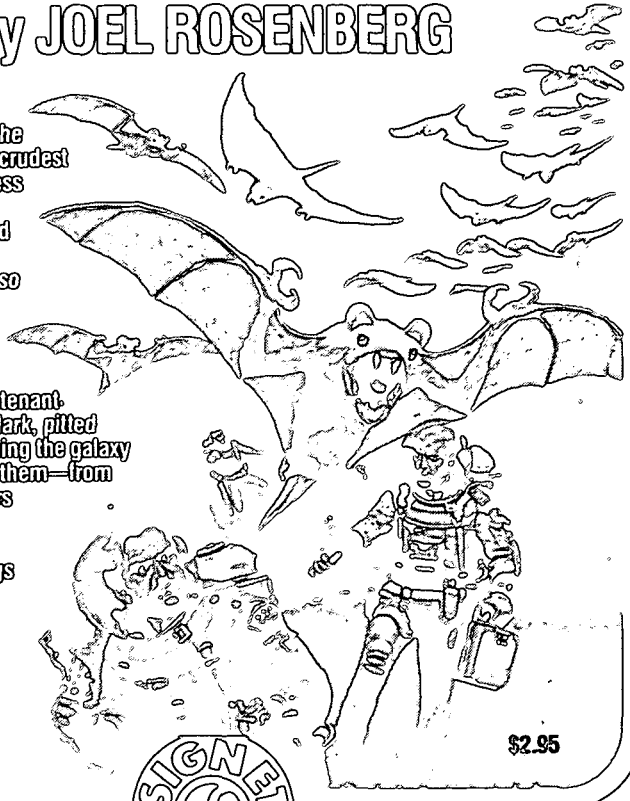

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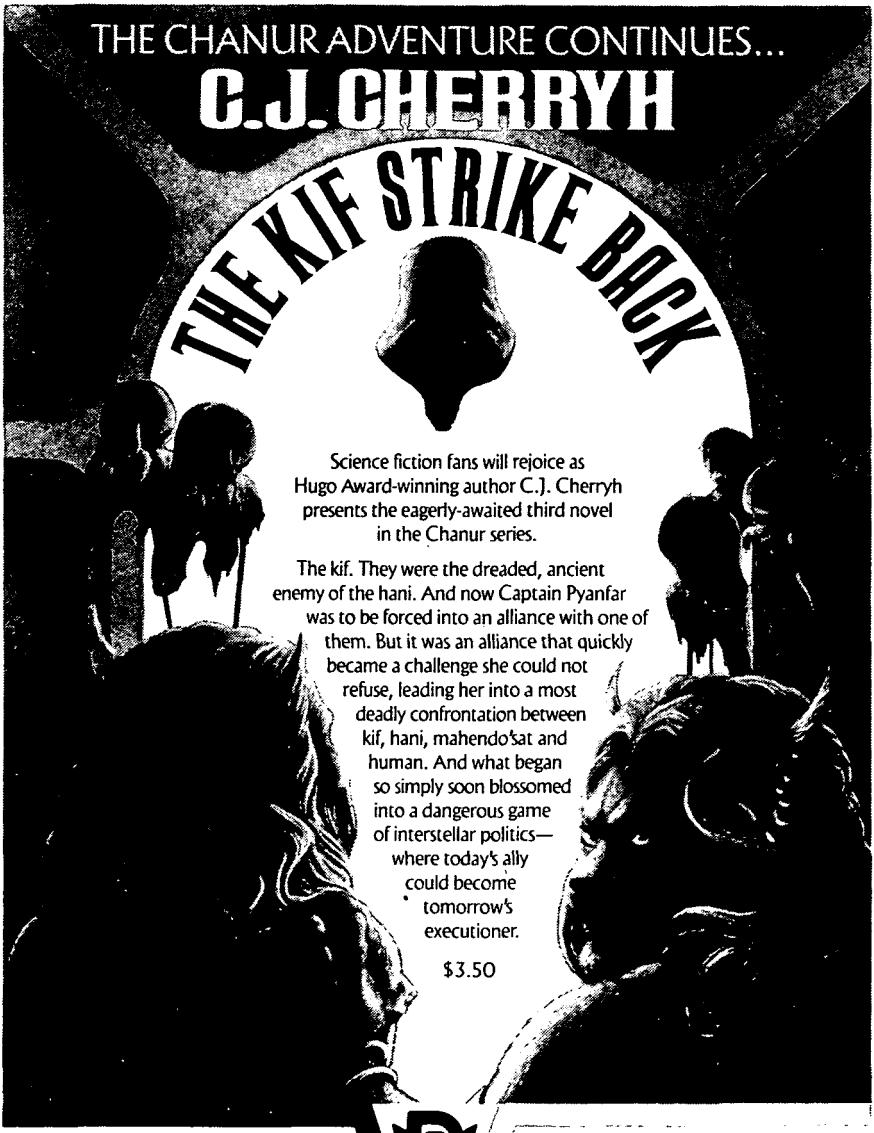
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Ian Watson wrote the River series, which appeared in F&SF in early 1984, and more recently contributed "White Socks" (February 1985). His latest is a truly different and compelling story, about a churchman who is obssessed with artificial light, even as his own vision slides into a strange and remarkable darkness. . .

Cold Light

BY
IAN WATSON

Doubtless it is one of life's typical ironies that a man with defective eyesight should have spent many long years studying the history of artificial lighting. However, my friend John Ingolby was also a prominent churchman. By the time his book appeared, John was well advanced in the hierarchy of the Church of England. He was bishop of Porchester.

Now, at this time the church was in a certain amount of disarray. On the one hand it was waning due to apathy. On the other, it was beset by fundamentalist evangelism that seemed unpleasantly frantic and hysterical. Between this Scylla and Charybdis, a new liberal theology was being steered that, it was hoped, would inject new life and modern, humane thought into a seemingly dying institution.

Not, however, without resistance!

Already one new bishop — who publicly denied the doctrine of the Virgin Birth — had been enthroned amidst scandal and protest. Within two days of his enthronement, the venue — an ancient cathedral, finest example of Gothic architecture in the land — was blasted by lightning and its transept gutted by fire. Reportedly the bolts of lightning came from out of a clear sky; so fierce were they that the lightning conductors were overloaded.

Immediately the popular press pointed gleefully to the hand of God himself as source of the miraculous lightning; and some traditionalist clergy endorsed this explanation of the meteorological hazard. The cathedral had been polluted by such an enthronement; here was God's sacred reaction. Yet God, of course, was also merciful. Having first set his house

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ablaze, he then permitted the massed fire brigades to quench the flames and save the majority of the edifice.

Liberal-minded churchmen issued statements explaining the fire as a coincidence, and deploring popular superstition. The same cathedral had, after all, been severely damaged by fire thrice already during its history — the most recent occasion, a hundred years earlier, being incidentally a case of arson provoked by another theological dispute.

Yet the noisiest single critic of the new bishop from amongst the ranks of ecclesiastics bitterly denounced such pussyfooting explanations. In disgust he publicly quit the English church and embraced the Greek Orthodox communion. The Greek Orthodox church, as its name implied, was a staunch guardian of doctrine, ritual and liturgy.

Some months later, scandal struck again.

A radical-minded dean and lecturer in theology had been hired as presenter for a major new television series called "The Quest for God." As the date for screening for the first episode drew near, this dean revealed in interviews that he did not believe in an afterlife; nor in the Resurrection of Christ; nor for that matter did he even accept the "objective" existence of a God. "God" was a personal construct of the moral consciousness of humanity, said he.

A wave of protest arose.

And of course that first installment of "The Quest for God" was blacked out nationwide by a lightning strike . . .

Of the industrial kind. TV engineers seized this opportunity to protest certain changes in their duty rosters.

The industrial dispute was soon settled; and two nights later the TV network transmitted the blacked-out episode in place of a football match. But by now newspaper headlines had trumpeted: LIGHTNING STRIKE BLACKS ATHEIST DEAN. Even though the smaller print below explained the nature of this particular bolt from the blue, editorials in bolder black type suggested that God may move in a mysterious way his lightning to direct.

Such publicity hugely swelled the viewing figures for a program that many people might otherwise have felt disposed to ignore; so much so that the "atheist" dean was obliged to preface his second prerecorded appearance one week later with a brief personal statement in which he quipped endearingly that if God did not exist, he could hardly have thought of a better way to draw the nation's attention to the quest for him.

It was in this fraught climate that John Ingolby's book was published, surprising me (for one) by its title —then by its angle.

Religion and the History of Lighting: that was the title. The last word

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is quite easy to confuse with "lightning"; and indeed the printers had done so at least a dozen times during the course of three hundred pages without John — with his poor eyesight — noticing the slight though substantial difference whilst he was correcting the proofs. However, this is a mere incidental irony. The primary shock of the book came from the manner in which, like some seventeenth-century metaphysical poem, it yoked together two apparently disparate things: a scholarly history of artificial lighting — and theological insights.

I admit that my first reaction was that an exuberant editor had persuaded John to rewrite his whole volume, giving it a new commercial slant.

Let's be honest. Suppose you happen to be an aficionado of beer mats; then their history is a consuming passion — to yourself, and to a few hundred other like-minded enthusiasts. However, your *History of Beer Mats* must inevitably lack the kind of popular charisma that sells a million copies.

Blazing sticks in Neolithic caves; grease and wick in a bear skull; Phoenician candles of yarn and beeswax; Roman tallow lamps; Elizabethan lanthorns; candles of spermaceti scented with bayberry; rushlights; Herr Wintzler's lighting up of Pall Mall with gas; Welsbach's incandescent mantle; De la Rue's dim electric light of 1820; Sir Joseph Swan's carbonized cotton filaments; Humphry Davy's carbon arc; Edison at Menlo Park; mercury vapor; neon, acetylene. . . . Fascinating stuff! Yet how many of the general public would wish to read three hundred pages about it?

John set the tone from the very outset. "We wanted light," he wrote, "so that we should not feel afraid. . ." He went on to parallel advances in religious awareness with the developing technology of artificial lighting: from early shamanism to paganism; from the "light of the world" Christianity, to medieval mysticism; from the Dark Ages to the modern enlightenment or radical theology. He suggested a direct link between the two: with lighting influencing religious beliefs, and religious beliefs influencing the technology of light.

John made great play with the fitful glimmering of candles and the haunting, soul-like shadows that flitted around rooms as a result; with the smokiness of oil lamps and the bonfires of the Inquisition; with the softly restful, comparatively brilliant glass chimney lamp of the Swiss chemist AiméArgand that climaxed the Age of Reason; with the clear, steady paraffin lamp of Victorian pragmatic Christianity.

He harvested a rare crop of quotations to prove his point, from such authorities as Saint Augustine and Meister Eckhart, Jakob Böhme and Kierkegaard, Tillich and Hans Küng.

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His chapter on medieval stained glass and the visionary cult of the millennium was masterly, and prefaced — anachronistically, I thought at first — by this famous passage from Shelley:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity . . .

But then, the finale to the chapter completed the quotation (which not many people know beyond its first two lines); and I understood.

. . . Until Death tramples it to fragments.

And what of late twentieth-century lighting — not to mention fiber optics, laser beams, and holography — and the new radical, atheistic, afterlifeless theology?

And what of the future? — a future that John saw as lying in the harnessing of "cold light": the bioluminescence of bacteria, the phosphorescence of fireflies and the fish of the abyss, which generate an enormous amount of chemical light with minimal energy input and without heat? What of the cold light of the next century, which must surely follow on from the bright yet hot and kilowatt-consuming light of our era? What of the theology of *that?*

My first assumption, as I say, was that the publisher had prevailed on John to jazz up his volume.

My second assumption, when I delved deeper into John's religious musings, was that he had decided to throw his cap into the ring of radical theology; that he had chosen to run up his colors as one of the avant-garde of the church.

Or had he? Or rather, on whose behalf was he running up his colors?

During the many years that I had known John — since college days, a time of life when brainstorming sessions are quite common — he had never to my knowledge spoken heatedly about the validity of the Virgin Birth, or of Christ's dead body walking around, or of the afterlife, or of a God in Heaven; or any of the crunch points of the new clear-vision theology that was even then taking shape. Indeed, I felt that John had entered the church largely as a reliable career — one in which he thought he would excel, since he was a good Latin and Greek scholar, but one in which his actual belief was nominal.

Let me be more specific. John did not doubt his vocation; nor did he question it. He was more like a younger son of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries to whom becoming a clergyman was a natural step; and like several such who became better known as naturalists or geologists or amateur astronomers, John had his own parallel, genuine passion — the history of lighting.

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John's father had been a vicar. His uncle was a bishop. The step was natural; advancement was likely. Without doubt, John was good-hearted; and was to prove excellent at pastoral duties. Whilst at college he involved himself in running a boy's club, and in serving hot soup to tramps of a winter's night. However, he seemed uninterested in theological disputes as such.

Could it be that John was deeply traditional at heart — and that his book was in fact a parody of the new rational theology? A spoof, a satire? Was he intending to pull the carpet out from under the feet of the church's intellectuals — like some Voltaire, but on the other side of the fence?

Had he been so annoyed in his quiet way by the new trends in theology that he had sacrificed to God all of his private research work into the history of lighting — his consuming hobby — so that by using it satirically he could defend the faith?

Would he watch and assess reactions to his book, then announce that *Religion and the History of Lighting* was in fact a holy joke? One intended to demonstrate the credulity of unbelief? To show up the trendy emptiness of today's scientific theology?

Or was John Ingolby entirely innocent of such guile? Was he a true innocent: the stuff of saints and geniuses and the dangerously naive?

Or was he simply shortsighted and afflicted with a species of tunnel vision that had compressed his two diverse occupations — the church and the history of lighting — absurdly yet persuasively into the selfsame field of view? Maybe!

At any rate, in the wake of the cathedral fire and the televised "Quest for God," the publicity department of John's publisher dangled his newly minted book under the noses of the media; and the media gladly took the bait.

Here was more "new theology" from a bishop; more (apparently) rational probing of "superstition" as a kind of slowly vanishing shadow cast by improving human technology, a function of blazing brands and paraffin lamps and neon and lasers; and an analysis of mystical insight as an analogue of candlepower and lumens — with the possibility, thrown in, of new illuminations just around the corner.

And did not Bishop Ingolby's book have something to say (at first glance) about holy lightning? Lightning that suddenly was humanized — into the sodium-vapor lamps on motorways, the neon strips over shop fronts — by the deletion of a single letter, *n*, like the removal by a clever trick of an unknowable infinity from an equation?

Yet — to reinject a note of mystery — did not the possibility of cold light remain? Here, John's fancy soared poetically.

The newspapers excelled them-

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selves. Bishop Ingolby was a debunker—and should be defrocked forthwith! Bishop Ingolby was a scientific mystic, striving to yoke technology to devinity! He was this. He was that.

Certainly he suddenly became notorious. *Religion and the History of Lighting* sold a lot of copies; a good few, no doubt, were read.

T-shirts appeared bearing the icon of a light bulb on them, and the legend: *S.O. & S.* Switch On, & See. (With a punning undercurrent of Save Our Souls.) These T-shirts seemed as urgent and arbitrary as their sartorial predecessors that had instructed people to RELAX! or FIGHT! or BREATHE!

Switch On, & See. But see what? See that there was nothing in the darkness of the universe? Or that there was everything? Or that there was something unforeseen?

Thus, by way of prologue to the strange and terrible events that happened subsequently . . . .

The "Bishop's Palace" in Porchester is, in actuality, a large Georgian house set in modest grounds of lawn and shrubbery standing midway between the railway station and the ruins of Porchester Castle. The west wing of the building was devoted to the administration of the diocese. The east wing was John's own domain, where the domestic arrangements were in the hands of a housekeeper, Mrs. Mott, who arrived every morning bright and early and departed every evening after dinner; for John had never married.

Most of the domestic arrangements were Mrs. Mott's province: cookery and cleaning, laundry and such. But the lighting styles of the various rooms in the east wing were John's own choice; and it was in this respect that one half of his palace resembled a living museum.

The kitchen was lit by electric light bulbs; the small private chapel by massive candles; the dining room by gas mantles; the library by brilliant neon strips. Innumerable unused lighting devices stood, or hung, around: Roman pottery oil lamps, miners' safety lamps, perforated West Indian gourds designed to house fireflies . . .

When I arrived to visit John at his urgent request on that early November evening several months after publication of his book, the whole of the east wing that met my gaze was lit up in its assorted styles, with no curtains closed. As I walked the few hundred yards from the railway station, a couple of anticipatory rockets whizzed up into the sky over Porchester and exploded, showering orange stars. This was the day before the country's children would celebrate the burning at the stake of the Catholic Guy Fawkes for trying to blow up a Protestant parliament —an earlier religious feud. John seemed, meanwhile, to be conducting his own

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festival of light.

I . . . .

But I haven't mentioned who I am, beyond the fact that I was at college with John a good many years ago.

My name is Morris Ash, and I am a veterinary surgeon turned homeopathist. I live in Brighton and cater to the more prosperous sectors of society. My degree was in biochemistry, and I had originally thought of going into medical research. A certain disenchantment with my fellow human beings — coupled with dawning ecological awareness of the soaring world population and the degradation of the natural environment — had shunted me into veterinary studies.

I had done well in my profession, though I never practiced to any great extent rurally with sheep and horses and cows, which may seem a contradiction (of which life is full). I had become an upmarket urban vet, a doggy doctor, a pussy physician, renowned among my patients' owners for my compassionate bedside (or basket-side) manner.

Twenty years on, I had five partners working with me and was more of a consultant in difficult cases than a routine castrator of tom-kittens. My thoughts turned once more to biochemistry and to medical research, but with a difference: I interested myself in homeopathy, in the theory of treating disease by means of minuscule, highly diluted doses of substances that would ordinarily cause disease. I began to investigate the possibility of treating animal ailments likewise, and within a few years I was supplying a wide range of home-made homeopathic remedies to the pets of my clientele, should the owners prefer this approach — and a gratifying number did. Homeopathy worked startlingly well in a number of recalcitrant cases; and word of my success spread quickly. I soon found that I was treating my erstwhile patients' owners homeopathically, too— though not, I hasten to add, for mange or distemper!

Now, there's nothing illegal in this. You need no medical qualifications to practice as a homeopathic doctor; and it's a curious fact, as I discovered, that a good many human beings would rather have their ills tended to by a vet than by an orthodox doctor.

A doctor is often cursory, reaching quickly for his prescription pad to scribble upon it in illegible Latin. A doctor is frequently inclined to treat his human patients as examples of blocked plumbing or as broken-down cars — this is the common complaint by patients. Whereas a vet must always fondle and gentle his patients (or else the vet is likely to be scratched, bitten, and kicked). A vet seems more sensual, more full of curative love. He is seen to cure — to a certain extent — by a laying on of hands, whereas a medical doctor metaphorically jabs a fist into you.

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Also, people might prefer to confide in a vet because his trade isn't viewed as a mysterious freemasonry. A vet has no cryptic knowledge or secret records.

Finally, the doctor appears to have the power of life or death over you; yet he will never exercise the power of death mercifully. Indeed the law forbids him to do so. Death can come only after a long, humiliating, and dehumanizing process of medical intervention that often seems experimental to the wasting patient and his relatives. The vet *does* possess the power of instant death. He can give lethal mercy injections to distempered puppies or crushed cats. Yet it is the instant *mercy* of this, not the lethal aspect, that is noted primarily.

(Did I mention love? I have admitted that I did not overly love my fellow human beings compared with the furry and feathered folk of the world. So, in common with John — though for different reasons — I, too, never married. As a result, to many pet-owning widowed ladies I seemed impeccably . . . shall we say, eligible? Which was perhaps another of my homeopathic attractions. I had diluted and rediluted my spouse potential over the years till I became, to some hearts, devastating.)

John and I had remained firm friends for many years — as I say — and we met perhaps thrice every year, the occasions variable. We seemed to have much in common. We were both confirmed bachelors. As regards charitable acts, John perceived me as a kind of lay Saint Francis of Assisi, ministering to the world's Chihuahuas and gerbils. I had told John, at some stage, all I knew about the enzyme-catalyzed chemical reactions that coldly light up fireflies, deep-sea fish, bacteria, and fungi; and how one day we might learn to light our homes and cities similarly — information that had surfaced, theologically mutated, in his book . . . .

I was welcomed to the palace. We drank excellent pale sherry. We spoke of homeopathy. We talked of John's book and of its lightning success (de scandale). He mentioned an upcoming television interview to be filmed in his variously lit home, during the course of which he would stride from room to room and thus from firelight era to neon era, expounding, concluding his performance in the candlelit chapel; but he was rather vague about these plans.

I tentatively broached the puzzle (to me) of the true intention of his book. Surely an old and discreet friend was privileged to know — especially since I myself had no religious axes to grind? John sidetracked me, to admire a lanthorn from Shakespeare's day that he had recently bought at auction and that now adorned the mantelshelf of his lounge.

Then Mrs. Mott served us dinner.

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It was a tasty meal but a queer one. We commenced with escargots and giant champignons, both cooked in butter; and John obviously had some difficulty distinguishing which of the spheres were snails and which were mushrooms. He attempted to slice through one snail shell and then to prick out the meat from within a mushroom. Had he commanded this menu as a deliberate tease to his bespectacled self?

A turbot steak in béchamel sauce followed. Next, in sentimental homage to a shared taste from our student days when we had both patronized the same cheap wholesome dive of a café, we tucked into tripe and onions accompanied by mashed potatoes.

Afterward came a meringue concoction; followed by a slab of Wensleydale cheese, and white coffee.

Mrs. Mott departed homeward, leaving us alone.

It occurred to me that the whole meal had been white, or at least creamy gray in color; and served upon white plates. Even the wine we drank with it was leibfraumilch — "milk of a beloved woman" — not that I should have fancied a robust Burgundy as accompaniment to the meat dish in question! Had we drunk Burgundy or some other red wine, it might have looked as though our glasses had miraculously filled with the blood so visibly absent from that part of the cow's anatomy.

An all-white dinner. Why?

Had Mrs. Mott gone mad?

"Will you pour the port?" asked my host; and I obliged. The port, at least, was a rich purple-red; a contrast on which I forbore, for the moment, to comment, though my curiosity was by now intense.

John tasted his wine, then at last confided in a low voice, "I'm going blind, Morris. Blind."

"Blind?" I repeated the word stupidly. I stared at John's round, rosy face and at the thick round spectacles thereon, which from some angles made his eyes seem to bulge. His cheeks were faintly pocked: a bad reaction to a childhood bout of measles, which I knew had nearly killed him and which had certainly impaired his eyesight. The dome of his head was mostly bald and smooth. His skin and remaining strands of hair were somewhat greasy. A lot of talcum powder would need to be patted onto him prior to any television appearance; or else he would seem shiny on screen.

I decided that it was high time to broach the matter of the meal—without insulting it, however, since my taste buds had relished every morsel even if my eyes had not had much to feast on.

"Er, John . . . the dinner we just ate . . . splendid fare! Mrs. Mott is to be congratulated. But, hmm, there wasn't a scrap of color in it. Everything was white from start to finish. White food on white plates. Highly

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ingenious! But, um, that doesn't mean that you're going blind — just because you couldn't see any colors. There weren't any to be seen."

John uttered a few staccato laughs.

"Oh Morris, I *know* that!" he declared. "Mrs. Mott has always been a great admirer of yours. The white dinner was in your honor."

"Was It? Why's that? I don't quite follow."

"You see, that's her understanding of how homeopathy works. In this case a homeopathic cure for failing vision. Take something as essential to the health of the body as a well-cooked meal. The smell and the taste play a major role in stimulating appetite. But so does the look of the meal: the contrasts, the colors."

"Oh, I see! Mrs. Mott imagines that by reducing the color content to almost nothing—"

"Just as the homeopath reduces the drug content of a medicine virtually to nothing, by repeated dilution. Exactly!"

"—thereby your visual faculty will be stimulated rather than dulled? Your brain will strain to discriminate the tiny traces of color remaining? My word, what an imagination that woman has."

"The white dinner was also served as a broad hint in case I didn't bring myself to ask your help, Morris."

Ah.

Now I could put two and two together.

Here was another instance where someone hoped for medical advice from a vet rather than from a doctor. A vet who was a close friend. A vet, moreover, who had no special bigoted axes to grind regarding a certain radical bishop who had reduced the visions of the saints to an absence of adequate light bulbs.

Doctors often had axes to grind. My patients' owners had complained to me thus more than once. Male doctors — most are male — harbor gynecological obsessions, obsessions about the "hysteria" of female patients. They nursed obsessions about plumbing and pills and tranquilizers. They held political views, often of a right-wing stripe, that they allowed to color their medical personalities. Or else they had religious obsessions — about, say, birth control or woman's role as a mother. There was no such thing as an objective doctor. Personal beliefs and prejudices always flavored diagnosis and treatment. By contrast, veterinarians could easily be objective — and at the same time loving — because (to put it bluntly and very generally) animals had no politics, and no religion.

"What do you think's wrong with your eyes, then, John, old son? Cataracts?"

Jonh emptied his glass of port, as though to fortify himself.

"I'm going blind within," he said. *"Blind within."*

"Now what do you mean by that?"

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"The blindness is like a shadow inside of me. This inner shadow is spreading. It's growing outward, ever outward."

I thought for a moment. "I'm no eye specialist," I said, "but it sounds to me — if you're describing this correctly — as though your optic nerves are inflamed. The pressure of the swelling could make the nerves atrophy gradually. The blind spot would seem to enlarge. Part of the retina would go blind."

John shivered. "It's more than that." He struck his forehead a blow. "This blindness has taken root inside me like some foul black weed!" His voice faltered and hushed. "It's because of my book, don't you see?"

"What?"

"I've prayed, of course. One does. I pray on my own in the chapel every morning for half an hour. Prayer clears the mind. The day organizes itself. Not that I pray for myself personally! I pray that the whole world shall see the light of goodness." John seemed embarrassed. He had never mentioned private prayer to me before. "Meanwhile my own light grows dim. *Vilely* so."

"In what way 'vilely,' John?"

"There's a taint of corruption to this blindness. A moral miasma is creeping around in me, spreading its tendrils."

"You blame this on the publication of your book? It's as though you're being . . . punished? I refilled his glass from the decanter. "I hate to say this, John, but a tumor is a remote possiblity. If a tumor presses upon the visual centers of your brain, there could be emotional repercussions. You might even sense the tumor as something dark and evil growing inside your head."

"Oh no, I wouldn't. If I had a tumor, I would suffer from a steady grinding headache for at least a few hours every day. Every now and then I might see complex hallucinatory patterns; or else an aura of flashing lights. You might suddenly look like an angel to me! Or Mrs. Mott might. I *do* have a number of books in my library that aren't about technology or theology. Medical books. I've checked up on tumors. I've checked up on eye troubles — I can still read, with spotlight and magnifying glass. Under normal circumstances what afflicts me would most likely be what is known as toxic amblyopia."

"Ah. Really? You'd better explain. Obviously I'm not the best fellow to hold a consultation with!"

"Oh, but you are. Now listen, will you? Toxic amblyopia involves a reduction of the acuteness of vision due to a toxic reaction of the optic nerve. I have the symptoms of this exactly. The *commonest* cause is overindulgence in alcohol or tobacco. But I don't smoke; and I don't ordinarily overimbibe. Quinine can also cause the condition; but I've never been near the tropics. I'm not one of

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your malarial missionaries of yesteryear. Other causes are prolonged exposure to various poisons, principally carbon dioxide, arsenic, lead, and benzene. One thought immediately springs to mind: Am I being poisoned by these gaslights in here, or perhaps by the candles in the chapel? By something in this very palace that is directly connected with my hobbyhorse? That would be ironic, don't you think?"

"Maybe you've already solved the puzzle, John." In which case why had I been invited? And why had Mrs. Mott cooked the all-white repast?

My friend shook his head. "I've had the gas mantles checked. They're perfectly safe. As for the chapel, ever since I began to suspect candles as possible sinners, I've lit only one at a time. No remission! I've thought carefully of every other oddity of lighting. All systems are innocent. And my vision is getting worse. The affliction has no cause; unless of course it has a miraculous cause. Miraculous," he repeated quietly, "or demonic. It's a sort of slow black lightning."

"But John, you yourself wrote that demons have no more substance than shadows cast by candles. You don't believe in demons."

"Ah . . . suppose for a moment that demons exist. I feel somewhat haunted, Morris."

"You're joking."

But I could see that he was not entirely joking.

"Don't bishops know how to deal with demons?" I asked him.

"Hmm. I should need to involve a colleague from within the church. Word would inevitably leak out. Likewise, were I to start consulting eye specialists. Embarrassing, don't you see? Embarrassing to the church. If I tried to arrange for the exorcism of a genuine — if troublesome — miracle, why, that would be worse. I should be attempting to cast God out of my life."

"Time to wheel on the homeopathic vet, eh?"

"I could do worse. At least I can discuss the ins and outs of this with you. Mrs. Mott's quite right on that score."

As we talked, a certain suspicion began to dawn on me; a suspicion I hardly dared put to John outright.

John had said that arsenic could cause toxic amblyopia.

Was it possible that Mrs. Mott was slowly poisoning John? Since white is the color of innocence, did her white meal that evening protest symbolically that she was innocent? But why should she protest innocence unless she knew her own guilt?

Why should Mrs. Mott have encouraged John to seek my advice? Perhaps she did not admire me at all, and actually regarded me as a charlatan whose advice would lead John far astray and keep him away from doctors.

John depended upon Mrs. Mott.

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He trusted her implicitly. Dared I cast any shadow of doubt upon their relationship? And what could the woman's motive possibly be? An inheritance — a load of peculiar lighting apparatus? (The palace certainly didn't belong to him!) Inheritance of royalties from his book? Those could hardly amount to a fortune.

Finally I decided to take the plunge.

To sugar the pill, I chuckled. "Speaking of phosphorescence," I said (though we hadn't been, for a while), "in the old days, phosphorus was often used as a poison because it's difficult to detect. Some phosphorus occurs naturally in the body. There's a famous case in which one intended victim was alerted when he noticed his bowl of soup glowing while he was carryinig it to table along a dark corridor!"

"Hmm," said John without more ado, "so why should Mrs. Mott wish to poison me?"

"I didn't mean to imply—"

"Oh yes, you did. Tiny doses of an arsenic compound, eh? A little bit of rat killer day by day. But in rather more than a homeopathic dose! She has no earthly motive."

"Maybe she has an unearthly one?"

"Explain."

"Maybe she regards your book as, um, blasphemous. Maybe she believes you're in league with the Antichrist."

"Mrs. Mott? I hardly think so! Do you?"

I thought about the comfy, devoted, cheery soul in question; and shook my head.

That night, as I lay on the verge of sleep in John's great oaken guest bed, my mind wandered back to the story of the phosphorescent soup. A soup bowl aglow in a dark corridor . . . .

Is this a tureen that I see before me
The ladle toward my hand? Art thou lobster bisque,
Vichyssoise, or plain beef broth with arsenic?
Art thou not, fatal bouillon, sensible
To tasting as to sight? Or art thou but
A potage of the mind?

I don't know quite why I decided to get up out of my warm bed to roam the November-chilly Bishop's Palace at midnight.Maybe I had some notion that in the pitch-dark kitchen I would spy some spice jar glowing phosphorescently, betraying the true poisonous nature of its contents. But get up I did, shuffling my slippers on my feet and belting my dressing gown about me, then proceeding to the door with hands outstretched.

I didn't use my pocket torch, nor had I opened the curtains. I knew that it was a dark, moonless night outside, but I wanted my eyes to retain the sensitivity of a cat so that the

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tiniest dose of light might register.

I felt my way along the upstairs corridor, tiptoeing past John's room next to mine, though I had little reason to fear that my faint footfalls—or the noisier creaking of the boards—might disturb him. John had long since told me that he invariably slept the sleep of the dead. As soon as his head touched the pillow, he became a log until dawn.

Still, the bathroom was in the opposite direction. How could I explain my nocturnal perambulation?

To cut the story of a long prowl short, I fumbled my way into the kitchen — then to all the other downstairs rooms, and even the chapel. Nowhere did I spy anything unusual.

The chapel was bitterly cold, but the chill I experienced was innocuous — winter was to blame. Unless a thermostat switched some heater on in the early morning, John's half hour of prayer must have been something of a penance. Supposedly there's another species of chill that runs down spines and makes dogs howl like banshees. Yet if it was devilish cold in John's chapel, I'm sure the devil had no hand in hypothermia, no finger in frigidity.

I returned upstairs, only stubbing my toe once.

In the darkness of the upper corridor, I miscalculated distances. I twisted a brass doorknob. It wasn't my own bedroom door that I opened — it was John's.

I realized my mistake at once because a ring of light illuminated the head of the bed, showing me John's face asleep beneath. He was wearing, of all things, a wooly nightcap with a big pompon that Mrs. Mott must have knitted for him.

The ring of light was no wider than his head, over which it seemed to perch. Though my eyes were well accommodated to night vision, the light wasn't brilliant. But it clearly showed me John's slumbering countenance and outlined the bed. Obviously the light was some reflection or refraction from outside, through the bedroom window. Perhaps a powerful arc lamp at the railway station?

I made my way to the window to check; but the heavy curtains were closed tight without a chink.

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring *of pure and endless light . . .*

There was no other glimmer in the room itself. No movement of mine dimmed or shadowed the ring of pearly light. Thoughts of Mrs. Mott as purveyor of phosphorus soup flew out of the window (or would have done so, had the window offered any way in or out). I could pretend to myself no longer. I ***knew*** what I was seeing.

Above John's head, as he slept, hung a halo.

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A halo such as saints wear in paintings.

Not so bright, perhaps! Not a radiant glory. A modest halo, which wouldn't even be visible if other light competed. But a halo nonetheless.

John's head was snuggled in a fat pillow. The halo was tilted across his face. I stretched out a cautious finger to touch the apparition.

Perhaps this was foolhardy of me, but I suffered no consequences. I felt no buzz, no shock, no warmth. The thing couldn't be an odd form of ball lightning or Saint Elmo's fire.

I swept my hand right through the halo, without effect. Then I shook John's shoulder.

"Wake up, old son! Wake up, will you?"

Eventually I roused him.

"House on fire? Burglars? What's the time?"

"No, no, no. None of that. Sit up."

As he sat up, the halo shifted position so that it was poised above the nightcap.

"What's up, Morris? Where's my torch?" (John's bedroom was equipped with nineteenth-century carriage lamps.)

I gripped his wrist. "No — no torch! Is there a mirror anywhere?"

"Inside the wardrobe."

"Will you show me?"

Grumbling mildly, John got out of bed — the halo accompanying him —and soon he was pawing a wardrobe door open.

Now there were two halos: one above John's head, and the other in the full-length mirror.

"Goodness, what's that light? I haven't got my glasses."

"I'll fetch them. Where are they?"

"Table by the bed."

I retrieved his spectacles, and he put them on.

"Goodness!"

"Goodness indeed, John — by the look of it! You're wearing a halo."

He stepped to and fro. He swung his hand across his head. He pulled off his nightcap — as though I might have attached that ghostly glow as a joke.

"Oh dear me," he said. "My eyes aren't much use — but I can see it. Dear me, I always thought there was something frightfully priggish about halos . . ."

"You must be becoming a saint, eh, old son?"

"What, me? A saint? Don't be silly. Besides saints never had actual rings of light over their heads! That's just an artistic convention. A way of picturing saints."

"Maybe some saints had actual halos — ones that people could see? But not in recent history."

"I think a halo would need to be brighter than mine, for people to notice!"

"Maybe yours is just a baby halo. A young one."

"Meaning that it'll grow stronger? As my eyes grow dim? Let's light some lamps."

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My friend located his torch and went through the rigmarole of getting carriage lamps to work. As the illumination of the bedroom increased, so did his halo fade away to a faint shimmer.

I sat on a chair; John perched on the bed.

"This is quite embarrassing," he said. "It's preposterous! I can't possibly be a saint in the making. And, what could conceivably cause a halo?"

"*Grace,* perhaps, my lord bishop?"

"You don't believe that."

"Any more than you believe it? I want to ask you, John: Did you write that book of yours to debunk radical theology? Is the book a kind of holy offering — of everything you cared deeply about — so that faith may be sustained?"

"Gracious me, I don't think so. Morris, I've told you that I feel an evil darkness spreading its shadow inside of me. If I'm sprouting a halo, I assure you this is at the *expense* of my soul! It isn't a spotlight to illuminate saintliness." He mused awhile. "How nice it would be to imagine that it's some lamp of goodness. How nice to visualize certain dim monasteries of the past as being genuinely lit by sanctity — with a saint's head as a light bulb! How lovely if cities of the future could be cold-lit by our own purity, should mankind perfect itself! Heaven would be radiant on account of its saints. Hell would be dingy dark because of its sinners. But that is emphatically *not* how I feel as this blindness eats up my vision."

Eats up.

"Your halo is eating your eyesight . . . what could that mean? That the halo is some kind of organized energy? It needs energy to sustain itself; to grow . . . ? Certain luminous deep-sea fish need to eat luminous plankton or else they stop glowing. And by glowing they attract their prey."

"What are you trying to say, Morris?"

"Maybe a halo is some sort of creature — an animal not of blood and bone but of energy. It's eating the photons that enter your eyes; or the electrical impulses in your optic nerves. That's why you're going blind. Your brain can sense it feeding inside you; consuming light, to produce light."

"A parasite? Why should it generate a halo? Hmm, famous saints of the past haven't been noted for their blindness . . . ."

"So halos can't be the work of parasites, presumably."

He shook his head in puzzlement. "You mentioned luminous fish attracting prey. What *prey* would a saint attract to him? Why, the faithful. The credulous. Some sinners ripe for conversion. People who are religiously inclined. A halo might be God's fishing hook. It might be an angel that takes up residence, in order to angle for souls. And it drinks photons from the saint's eyes, to power the halo? I

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don't know, hagiographically, of many saints who had impaired vision!"

"Maybe there have been only a few true saints — whose halos became legend? You're the next saint. The miracle for a godless age."

"Are you *trying* to canonize me, Morris? You should be devil's advocate."

"I'm only looking at the possibilities. Here's another one: Maybe in the past there were more conduits to the divine light? The halo-angels didn't need to suck the vision from a saint. There were other sources of energy."

"In that case why should I sense that my blindness is *evil*? Why should I feel such a lack of grace?"

"I don't know."

"When I become blind as a bat, does my halo grow with glory? Whose faith is being tested? The world's, or mine? Is this a test of faith at all — or is it the work of some vile parasitic creature from elsewhere, with its own motives? Is that what a miracle is: something you can't ever prove, but must take on trust, like God himself? Even though you feel that you yourself are damned! Possessed!" He stretched out his hands toward me. "If I beg you to cure me, Morris — God knows why — do I damn myself? Should I let my halo strengthen and thus confirm the faith of millions of people — while I lose my own belief, sunk in my personal deep, dark pit?"

"Maybe the thing will go away," I said feebly. "Maybe it'll fade, and your eyesight will improve."

"Will you stay with me a few more days?"

"A week. Longer, if need be. Of course I will."

He sighed. "Thank you, Morris. Now you'd better go back to bed. And so shall I." His bishop's authority suddenly blossomed. "Be off with you, Morris! I shall extinguish the lanterns. I shan't toss and turn, or lie brooding."

A week later I was still staying at the palace; and the halo was intensifying. I could see the ring of light above John's head in the daylight or artificial lighting. My friend's eyesight had worsened drastically.

There was no question now of rushing him to an optician's or to a hospital. Moreover, John and I were in full agreement that Mrs. Mott should be kept in the dark regarding the halo. I carried the meals she cooked to John's room on a tray, and cut up meat for him.

The bishop was ill, incapacitated, and I was treating him — that was the story. He had a serious infection, though nothing dangerous or fatal. Mrs. Mott accepted the situation only when John told her firmly, from the other side of his door, that this was so.

The business of the diocese was dealt with likewise. John's secretary took umbrage somewhat; he also

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wanted a "genuine" doctor called to examine the bishop. Through the wood of the door, the bishop overruled him loudly; and I witnessed an aspect of my friend that made me realize how he also had a tough streak — he hadn't become a bishop simply through a combination of good works and nepotism.

John's mind remained keen. The halo-creature that had infested my friend had no apparent ambition to speak through his lips, whisper words in his head, or influence his dreams.

But it brightened; how it brightened.

"Even when I become stone-blind," John said to me, "I'll not really be *blind*. It's just that all the light will be stolen to create my halo. And it won't be long till I'm stone-blind. Should we phone the television people, do you think? Tell them to rush here for a news conference? Should I display this miracle to the world? Should I say: *Here* is God's lightning? But it doesn't strike the transepts of cathedrals. It circles about my head calmly and brightly — while *I* dwell in a pit of mud forevermore, as if in Dante's Inferno.

"Should I say: Behold the cold light of the future, of the next age of belief? I bear it as my cross — or rather, my circle, my ring of Peter, my *annulus angeli*. Yet I know that my angel is dark. It glows only by theft, by a vampirism of light. So how can it be from God? This has destroyed my faith in God as surely as it has destroyed my sight. If this thing is God's punishment, then maybe I should damn God! If it is his blessing: likewise! And if it's sent by the devil, then the world will never be perfected. We will never be enlightened."

"Maybe," I suggested, "you need a spiritual adviser rather than a homeopathic vet?"

He shook his head brusquely; the halo remained steady. "*I* . . . must decide. Only I know what it is like to be me at this time."

And decide he did — in the most gruesome manner . . . .

A distant cry clawed me out of sleep.

I flipped on my own bedside torch (absolute prerequisite in this palace where lighting systems varied from the latest to the least of technologies!) It was 5:30 A.M. by my watch. The world was still deep in darkness. Had I heard an owl screech in the frosty castle ruins?

"Morris!"

My friend's voice came from far away.

I found him in the chapel. All the candles were lit. He knelt before the little altar. By him on the flagstone lay a bloodstained bread knife. Blood ran down his cheeks — down a ghastly empty face. On the altar cloth, staring at the silver cross, perched his two eyeballs.

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In moments of horror it's odd what petty details you notice. I noticed that John had used a bread knife — with a sawtooth edge and a rounded end. The rounded end, to spring his eyeball loose. The saw, to sever the optic nerve.

Maybe this wasn't such a petty detail. It proved how much forethought had gone into his mutilation of himself.

His blind, unblinking eyes stared moistly at the sign of Christ. Above his head in the light of so many candles, the halo could hardly be seen.

"Is that you there, Morris?" His voice spoke pain.

"Yes."

"Has the damned thing gone yet?"

"I think it's fading. Oh John, *John*!"

Fading, fading fast. By the time the ambulance arrived, no halo was visible.

Needless to say, I accompanied him to hospital. By the time a doctor could assure me that John was resting comfortably, sedated, a detective inspector and two other officers had arrived at St. Luke's anxious to speak to me. The ambulance man had radioed a report; the police had hurried to the palace, arriving shortly before Mrs. Mott. They had seen the bloody bread knife and the eyes perched upon the altar. It must have looked like a sadistic crime performed by a madman, me.

Fortunately I hadn't touched the knife.

During the the hours of questions until John recovered from sedation, I learned how the thought processes of the police resemble those of our most disgraceful tabloid newspapers. This should hardly have surprised me, since to a large extent both share the same contents. The detective inspector spent ages pursuing the notion that Bishop Ingolby and I, both bachelors, might have been homosexually involved since college days; thus the atrocity was the product of a vicious sexual quarrel, possibly with aspects of blackmail attached — the bishop was a famous man now, was he not?

Even after John woke up and exonerated me, the detective inspector was loath to discard his suspicions. After all, the bishop might be trying to cover up for me; and for himself as well. My fingerprints weren't on the handle of the knife; only John's were present, and Mrs. Mott's beneath. But I might have worn gloves.

Perhaps I oughtn't to blame the police. They must have been well aware that I was lying — and later that John also was lying about a motive for the mutilation.

The one "sure" fact relayed by Mrs. Mott — namely that the bishop feared he was going blind — seemed not so sure in view of John's doctor knowing nothing of this; nor the dio-

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cesan secretary either.

And in what mad emotional equation did fear of impending blindness lead to the wanton gouging out of one's eyes?

In a sense it was gutter press that came to our rescue. Tipped off either by police or by ambulance men, newshounds descended on Porchester. To them the vital fact was that the eyes of John Ingolby — skeptical author of *Religion and the History of Lighting* — had been placed on the altar of God. What else could they be but an offering?

Thus the press added two and two together and made four. Whereas the real answer was some entirely irrational number. Or maybe a zero: the mysterious zero of the halo.

"Why did you really put your eyes on the altar, John?"

Two weeks had passed. John was back home in the palace, convalescing. But he wouldn't remain at the palace much longer; the archbishop's personal assistant was pressing for John's resignation, rather urgently, on compassionate grounds.

By that hour, Mrs. Mott had departed. So had John's doctor, who had called to inspect the eye sockets and change the dressings. We were alone in the palace together, John and I. How like the evening of my arrival; except that John wore a blindfold now. Except that we had earlier eaten an ordinary dinner of brown beef, green cabbage, and golden roast potatoes.

"Why, John?"

"Well, what do you think? I've always been a tidy fellow. Where else should I have put them? Down on the floor? I didn't want anyone to stand on them and squash them!"

"That's the only reason? Tidiness?"

"I had to tidy up, Morris. I had to tidy up more than merely my eyes. You know that."

"I suppose so . . . . Will you accept artificial eyes? Glass, plastic, whatever?"

He laughed wryly. "From artificial lighting — to artificial eyes! A logical progression, if an unenlightening one. Yes, I should think that glass eyes would be harmless enough. If not, they're a lot easier to get rid of! Just flush them down the toilet."

"You're a brave soul, John. A true saint: a gentleman and a martyr — an unacknowledged one."

"Let's hope I remain unacknowledged."

Yes, he was a gentleman — of the old school of English gentlemen who produced many Anglican parsons and bishops in the past. In common with such, he disliked hysteria, enthusiasm, and excess. He had performed that savage operation of optectomy (if that's the word) to root out a hysteria that was alien to him, but that might have spread outward in shock waves from his halo. He had carried

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this out in the cold light of dawn (almost), and certainly had applied the cold light of reason — so that the future might be reasonable.

For sanity's sake he had denied himself any future glimpse of light, natural or artificial.

In my eyes this truly made him a saint. And a martyr, too, even though he hadn't died. I alone knew this; yet how could I ever tell anybody?

John Ingolby had written a final, definitive, unpublishable chapter to his life's work — using not a pen but a bread knife. Every time I sliced a loaf of bread in the future, I would feel that I was performing an act of anti-communion. A refusal to accept the unacceptable.

I felt that more than a mere bishop was on the point of retirement in Porchester. So, too, was an enfeebled, diluted God, whose last miracle had been rejected because it would harm the world, not help it. Just as it had harmed John.

"I'm donating my collection to Porchester Museum," he told me. "After I've moved out of here, there'll be thoroughly modern lighting in every room." He sounded as if he were choking.

"Are you all right, old friend?"

"I'm weeping, Morris. And I can't ever weep. Except inside."

"Maybe God had nothing to do with any of this!" I spoke to encourage him. "Maybe the halo-parasite was something else entirely. A visitor from elsewhere in the universe. A life-form we know nothing of. You felt it was evil, remember? It might have been natural — or devilish. Aren't angels supposed to announce themselves?"

"*I* felt it was evil," he replied. "*I* did. Nobody else who saw my round, benevolent face with a lustrous halo perched above could possibly have imagined evil. They would have seen only the light of goodness shining forth. Mine was the evil, don't you see? *Don't you see?*" And tearlessly he wept.

Or at least I suppose he was tearless. He hadn't actually carved out his tear ducts. But no welling tears would lave his cheeks. Tears would drain into the empty sockets. I didn't press for details of how an eyeless man weeps.

I did my best to comfort him.

But there was I, sitting in a convivially lit room; whereas he was sitting in darkness. Darkness, always. Forever haunted by the night that had overtaken him.

Just thirty months later the announcement has come, from Matsuya Biotechnic K.K. of Japan, of the development of artificial bionic eyes that can be plugged into the optic nerves.

Matsuta Biotechnic's deluxe model improves upon our ordinary visual organs of muscle, jelly, and liquid

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amazingly. With tiny touch controls (hidden by the eyelid) these Japanese eyes can be adjusted to range into the infrared, to magnify telescopically, and to peer owl-like on the darkest night.

The world's armed forces are very interested; though there's one small snag. To use Matsuya eyes, first you need to have your own eyes amputated.

In the two years gone by, I must have visited John almost a dozen times at his retirement cottage in a little vilage near Porchester, where Mrs. Mott continued to care for him; and I knew how he was suffering.

Not pain — but anguish.

Not poverty — his book had sold massively in paperback and in foreign editions in the wake of his self-blinding — but claustrophobia of the spirit.

John had been fitted with false plastic eyeballs that were most convincing. The blue pupils were holographically etched so that the eyes looked twinklingly alive, more so at times than real eyes.

He phoned me a fortnight ago.

"I'm going to buy a pair of these new Matsuya eyes," he told me. "Assuming that their experts can summon up the nerve to fit them!" He laughed sharply. "The optic nerve, I mean. Just so long as there's enough optic nerve still alive and kicking in my head. I can't take any more of this hellish darkness, Morris. The halo-creature must have died ages ago. Given up; gone home — whatever halo-creatures do when their host starves them out."

We had spoken much about the "halo-creature," John and I.

An angel? A demon? An extraterrestial life-form? Or a creature from some other universe entirely — from some other mode of existence — that had strayed across the boundary from its reality into ours?

The creature wasn't necessarily intelligent. It might have been no brighter, intellectually, than a fish of the abyss or a firefly.

Maybe it was a parasite upon some alien beings who had visited our world in secret; and it had escaped. Did it convey some advantage upon such hypothetical alien beings? Or was it just an inconvenience to them — a sort of common cold, a bug of the eyes? The evil that John had sensed might well have been the quality of alienness rather than some moral, metaphysical pang.

We had gradually settled on a naturalistic explanation, though without any actual notion of the natural history of the beast involved. Certainly a parasite that blinded its host and lit up a beacon above its head didn't seem very survival-minded. But maybe in this respect John was a South Sea islander infected by European mumps or measles.

Or at least, *I* had settled upon this solution. John still spoke of hellish darkness.

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Now technology would save him by banishing that darkness — just as improved artificial lighting had progressively banished spooks and spirits, devils and gods, lumen by lumen, century by century.

"I've been in touch with the Japanese trade people in London," he said. "Matsuya will fly a couple of their surgeons, and a pair of eyes, over the Pole. It's good publicity for their company. You could say I've been pulling strings. In ten days' time they can pull mine, inside my head, and see whether those still work. If all goes well, I should be home with my new eyes in a couple of weeks. *Jubilate!*"

All has indeed gone well.

John Ingolby can see again. He can see far better than ever he saw before in all his life. He can see better than almost all of the human race—unless they've had nature's optics removed and bionic eyes substituted.

The newly revealed world comes as a revelation to him. My face, unseen these past two years, is a mystic vision. So, too, is Mrs. Mott. Likewise her cottage garden of herbs and flowers.

Likewise the nighttime, which he can pierce with ease, seeing monochrome hills and trees and cows and hedges, the stars above drilling a thousand bright little lamp-holes.

Likewise the heat-image of the world at dawn with those same cows appearing as vivid red humps in the cool blue fields, leaving faint rosy footsteps behind them in the dew. A bird is a flaming meteor.

Such beauty redeems John's soul. His new eyes look less human than the plastic ones; they're silver-gray and at some angles seem like mirrors in his head. But that's of no account.

John—"

It's the second night of my visit, and we have stepped outside to stargaze. Mrs. Mott has already retired early to bed.

"It's back, John."

"Eh?"

"Your halo: it's showing faintly."

"Don't joke, Morris."

"I'm not joking. I can *see* it."

He hurries closer to the cottage and peers in a curtained windowpane. Everything is much more visible to him. His reflection there confirms my word.

"Oh my God. So it wasn't living in my eyes and feeding on the photons. It was in my brain all the time. It's been lying dormant like a frozen virus. The light has brought it back to life. Oh my God. These Matsuya eyes are permanent. I can't pull them out when I feel like it . . . ."

"And you can't switch them off?"

"Why should anybody want to switch their eyes off? When I go to bed, my eyelids do the job. An on-off

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button would be one control too many. It's early yet for bionic eyes."

He tells me of Matsuya Biotechnic K.K.'s boast that future eyes will have computerized display functions activated by voice command, with memory chips located in a unit that might be surgically implanted behind the ear or in the jaw. Owners of Matsuya eyes will be able to call up statistics, run graphics across their field of view, access encyclopedias.

But not for several years yet, such sophistication.

"John, this time I think we ought to tell people. You could begin by telling the Japanese."

"No,"

"Why not? They'll be worried in case the halo's some fault of the Matsuya eyes. Or they might suppose you've stumbled on some hidden power of the mind that their eyes have triggered. The liberation of the third eye by their lenses! They'll have equipment for probing the halo. They might be able to look into your brain through the eyes."

"No, Morris, the problem's the same as ever. Oh God, to have all the wonder of the world restored to me thrice over — then to have it polluted and thieved again! I'm no saint!" he snarls suddenly. "I might have been a saintly codger in Porchester, but I damn well stopped being one during these past two years."

We go inside the cottage and drink brandy.

John gets drunk.

The halo isn't at all conspicuous when Mrs. Mott serves us our breakfast of bacon and eggs. She notices nothing odd, but I can spy the faint shimmer.

The sky is blue, the sun is bright.

"Lovely spring morning," observes John. "Might cloud over later. We'll take a walk up Hinchcombe Hill."

Hinchcombe Hill is a mile away along a lane, then up through a steep forest ride to a gorse-clad hilltop, which is deserted save for some Suffolk ewes. Suffolks are a chunky breed that lamb early, before Christmas; these ewes are already parted from their offspring.

It was cool walking up through the shade of the fir trees, but here on the hilltop it's as hot as a summer's day.

"Can you see our circular friend?"

"The sun's too bright," I tell him.

"Good. Now, we all know that we shouldn't stare at a bright sun, don't we, Morris? The sun can burn the cells of the retina. My retina is a machine. It's much more resilient. The flash from a hydrogen bomb might burn Matsuya eyes — but we all know that a nuclear flash is brighter than a *thousand* suns, don't we? So I ought to have lots of spare capacity even if I switch over to night vision."

"Don't do it, John."

"I don't care if I harm these eyes. Not now."

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"You might damage your brain. The visual centers."

"Where the beast dwells, eh? Unless it dwells in a separate universe, or in Heaven, and only has a peephole in my head."

He sits down on a boulder facing the sun. "You want feeding?" he cries out. "I'll feed you!"

For some reason — habit, ritual, or insurance policy? — he crosses himself, then begins to stare fixedly at the sun. Loudly he hums the hymn tune "Angels from the Realms of Glory" over and over again monotonously.

Minutes pass.

"I can see it, John. It's glowing."

Brighter, ever brighter.

Presently it's a full-fledged radiant halo; and still he stares into the sun.

He breaks off humming. "Report, please!" he says crisply.

"I can't look directly at it any longer. It's getting too fierce." At least the halo's light is cold, otherwise John's head would surely start to cook.

"Not from my point of view! The day grows dim. The sun looks like a lemon in a mist." *Ang-els! from! the Realms! of Glo-ry!*

I simply have to turn away. The ewes have all trekked off down the slope away from this second, miniature sun in their midst.

"I'm going blind fast, Morris. It's really gobbling light."

"And pumping it out again!"

"I'll soon be back in darkness. But no matter." *Ang-els! from!*

If only I had some tinted glass with me. I only dare risk a glance now and then.

Glance:

The halo isn't doughnut-shaped any longer. It's a sphere of furnace light just like a second head. Its afterimage bobs above the fir trees as though a ball of lightning is loose.

The Realms! of Glo-ry!

I cast two shadows on the grass and gorse.

Glance:

"It's elongating upward, John!"

A pillar of blinding silver radiance: it could light a whole street.

In the afterimage a figure hovers over the trees, sliding from side to side: a body of sorts. It fades.

Glance:

Now the afterimage is sharper. That isn't a human body. It's too slim, except where the chest swells out. The legs are too short, the arms too long and skinny. The head is like a bird's, with a beak of a mouth.

Ang-els! from!

The afterimage has wings, great trailing plumed wings.

It's the blazing angel who threw Adam and Eve out of Eden.

"There's a creature perching on your head, John! A tall, scraggy bird! It's like a man — but it isn't."

Its claw feet are planted on John's skull as if his skull is an egg that it is clutching.

Glance:

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The afterimage opens its beak.

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" What a screechy, reedy voice.

John isn't humming any longer. The words are screeched from *his* lips in the tones of a parrot or a myn-ah bird.

"I hear you!" I shout.

I shade my eyes with both hands in a visor: John is sitting as before, gazing rigidly up at our sun.

"I come," screams the bird of light. "I announce myself!"

"Where do you come from?"

"I take."

"Take what? Where to?"

"My prey! To my aerie!"

John must be the creature's prey. I have to break his link with the power of the sun! Sheltering my head from the horrid pillar of light, I stumble at a crouch and buffet him sideways off his rock. With my own eyes closed tight, I cast myself down beside him. Fumbling, I find his head and seal my hands across his Matsuya eyes.

"Aiiieee!" shrieks the voice.

John's own voice calls out: "Oh blessed visions! Realms of glory! Celestial city of the angels! With the slimmest, highest of towers all lit by cold light at night as though a star has settled on every pinnacle — an angel perching on each. White angels drifting through the pearly sky of day. A meadowland below with little blue goat-elves all a-grazing by the river of milk—"

"Don't heed it, John! Cast it out of your head."

"My soul will go inside an angel's egg."

"Refuse! The thing is trying to take your mind away with it."

"I'll be reborn — angelic."

"They're birds of prey, John. Alien eagles, not angels."

"No, they are celestial —" His voice chokes off.

"Aiiieee! I triumph!"

John's body shudders, then grows still.

Cautiously I open my eyes. The blinding light, the second sun, has gone. Only our own yellow sun beams on the gorse, the rocks, the grass; and on my friend's body.

I feel for his pulse; there's none. His heart has stopped. I don't know how to give the kiss of life, but I still try to breathe animation back into him — in vain.

I sit by his sun-warmed corpse for a long while.

John thought that his mind would go into an angel's egg on that alien world, in that other reality.

Presumably he would hatch.

As what? As an angel, the equal of the other angel-birds?

Or as a prisoner, bringing honor to its captor? A slave? A sacrifice? A gift to the Lord of the Birds of Light?

I shall soon walk back down the hill, through the forest ride, along the lane alone. I shall have to say that the strain of the ascent caused a cor-

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onary and broke his heart. I shall say that his spirit has ascended to Heaven, where he is now at home.

I must hope that no one else saw the blinding light on Hinchcombe Hill, the radiance that raptured John away to an alien aerie, leaving the abandoned clothing of his flesh behind.

Maybe John will be happy when he hatches, to the cold light of that elsewhere-city. And maybe there's no such city; maybe his last visions were lies, opiates pumped into his skull to paralyze his will . . . .

A few ewes return, to stare at the two of us with mild curiosity.

"How I made it into here without even a lifetime achievement award is a miracle to me."

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HORSECLANS #14

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By ROBERT ADAMS

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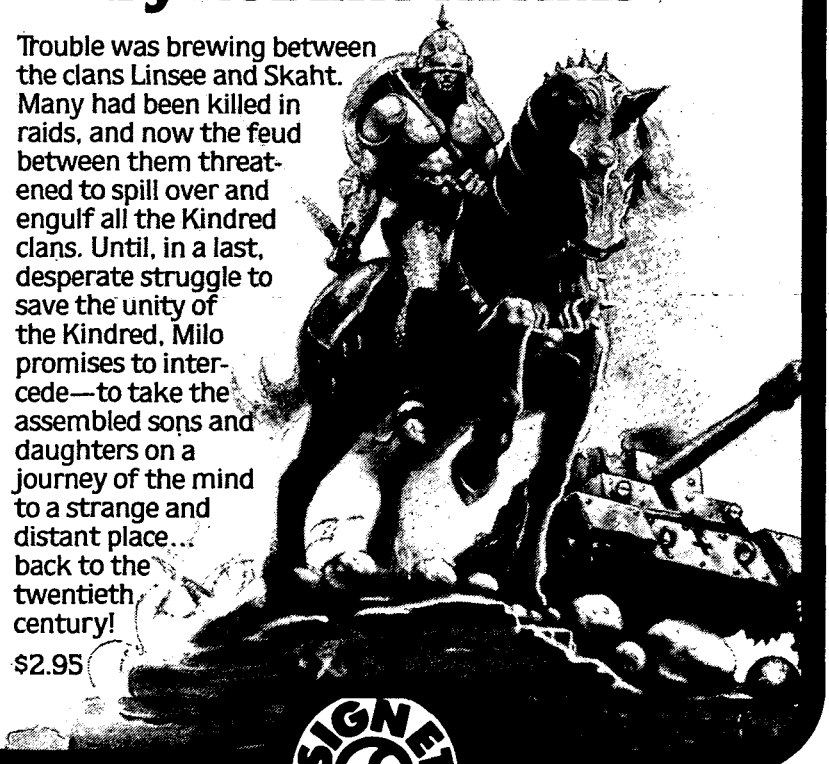

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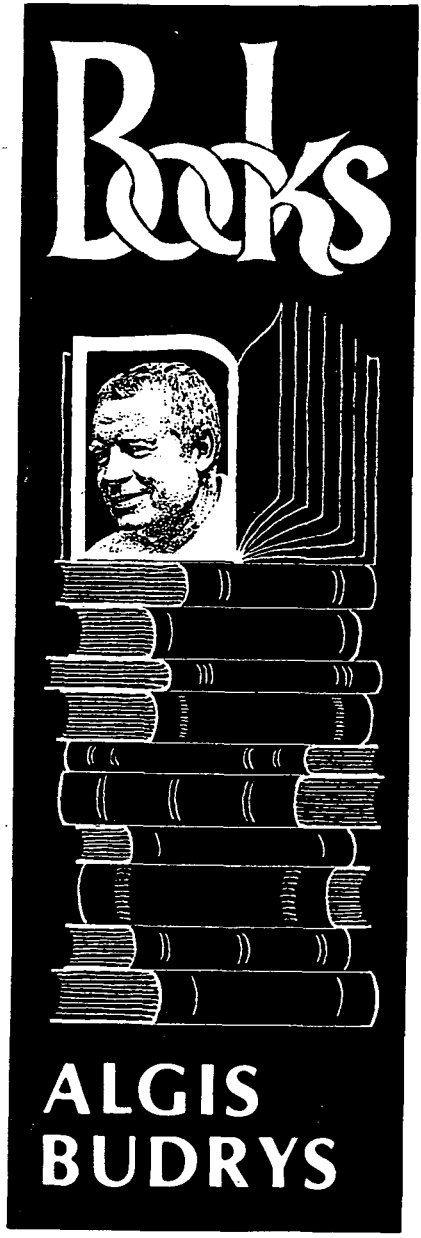

Vampire Junction, S. P. Somtow, Berkley, $3.50

In Yana, Michael Shea, DAW Books, $3.50

It was all very simple; there were four proses: Journalism, descriptive fiction, speculative fiction, and metafiction. Everything that wasn't fiction was journalism, from cereal-box copy on through your daily paper to PhD theses. "Descriptive fiction" is the term I coined to replace all approximate terms such as "mundane fiction," "general fiction," "the Mainstream," etc. Metafiction is the sort of thing written by Jorgé Luis Borgés, Italo Calvino and sometimes Craig Strete . . . descended, I guess, of Franz Kafka and Carl Jung, of whom more later. And speculative fiction, which I usually call SF, is that literature which contains science fiction and fantasy. SF, much like descriptive fiction today and probably metafiction tomorrow, contains genres and sub-genres but is not — in this model, cannot be — itself generic.

And that was it; everything in prose literature was contained in there somewhere, and you could tell one thing from another; hold it up, discuss it on its own terms or by comparison to other defined entities, and then return it to its proper socket in the hold-all when you were for the nonce done with it.

It was a crisp, clean model, much like a snowflake. It had obvious main branches, each branch had a pleasur-

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able series of proliferations, and what a piece of work is Man so plausible in reason!

It is still a good model as of this writing, but a certain tinge — thick here, thinner there, nearly absent in places, dripping yon — has come over it. (And if there be one color, are there not others, perhaps many others; is the snowflake perhaps so saturated with chromatic attributes that it glitters and dazzles not like a diamond but like obsidian misinterpreted? From what turbulent source of vapor commeth this mesmerizing condensate?)*

What it is, you see, is that while some horror-writing is fantasy, horror-writing has *plainly* ceased to be a genre of fantasy.

The emphasis here is on its patency. Ever since the emergence of *Exorcist*-type novels, and certainly since the boom in Stephen King, critics attempting to discuss it have — well, anyway, this critic has — been hampered by a troublesome inability to clearly define how horror-writing fits with what some call "more classical forms of" fantasy.

For a while, it was possible to speak as if all horror fiction were based on aspects of the Christian mythos; such books as *The Exorcist* and Thomas Tryon's *The Other* do in fact depend on a (heretical and superstitious) acceptance of a demonology drawn (ostensibly) only from the Old and New Testament. Thus we could point to a domain that lay outside classical fantasy; was fantastic but might even arguably not be SF. Alas all thinking, King for example, then appeared, with books that (ostensibly) have nothing to do with the works of William Peter Blatty or Tryon, any more than they do with, for example, *Jaws*, Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, or L. Ron Hubbard's *Fear*.

. . .Well, *The Shining* is something like *Psycho*, and so is *Cujo*, really, but as for *Jaws* and *Fear*. . . . Well, *Fear*, for all that it ran in *Unknown* and is to this day cited as a classic by readers of its first and subsequent printings as a "work of fantasy" is in fact blood kin, you should excuse the expression, and precursor of, *Psycho*, and contains no fantasy per se . . . but we had been ignoring any possible broader significances of that and similar facts simply because they were so sparse on the ground. Now things are different. Now we have to stop and deal with the possibility that King-like writing is the latest fulfillment of a trend away from mere disaster novels toward a frankly expressed fascination with the smoky yawning gulfs that might underlie rationality.

In that proposition, *Jaws* and its short-lived ilk are seen as transitional works, franker than *The Towering Inferno*, less amenable to visceral reactions than *'Salem's Lot*. And we here

*Patience, Carl — your turn here will come.

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in our community have to find the meaning of Bloch's being H.P. Lovecraft's apprentice, and of Ray Bradbury's not only being drawn to *Weird Tales* but of producing such non-SF but indubitable horror-pieces as "The Next in Line" even after he had moved into the slick markets. (We have to find out more than that, but there's one of the places in which to start what will be a long process.)

At Philcon,* in December, 1985, David Hartwell led a panel discussion on horror, and from it emerged an awareness that horror-writing is in fact trans-generic.

This has quite a few implications on a variety of levels. For example, publishers and editors tend to speak of it as a "cross-category" product; they are made unhappy by the fact that bookstores meld it in with the "general fiction" or with the fantasy and science fiction. Some of them, like Tor Books and editor Melissa Singer, are attempting to persuade the retailers to create "horror" sections in which fans of what will inevitably be miscalled this genre may readily find what they are looking for.

But literarily what we are seeing is a literature definable not by what it does rationally and structurally, or even by the milieux in which it sets its tales, but simply by its effect. And that effect is neutral toward genre and literary classification. We can have — and have had — science fiction horror stories, fantasy horror stories, space-opera horror stories, Gothic fantasy horror stories, horror stories borrowing the format and much of the trappings of descriptive fiction, and, I doubt me not, sports-horror stories, air-war horror stories, and on, and on. There is something in Kafka and Borges, and quite a lot in Strete, that produces the horror effect. I know for a fact we have had "true confession" and "men's true adventure" horror fiction, and can anyone doubt that there is such a thing as horror journalism?

Being neutral toward genre — that is, being as likely to be somehow like *Life on The Mississippi* as it is to be somehow like *The Book of The New Sun* — horror-writing can either embrace genre signatures or, theoretically, ignore them. The leading new horror writers appear to have an instinctive grasp of this. It can be seen, I think, in the fact that both Peter Straub and Stephen King as novelists are markedly slapdash in their plotting. Both have an extensive familiarity with classical literature and with mass-market writing as it was practiced during their formative years, but they use as little of either as possible.

The typical (and wildly success-

**The annual SF convention in Philadelphia. Drawing attendees from all over the SF community, Philcon is arguably the most prestigious "local" SF convention in existence; it is certainly the oldest and one of the most seriously constructive.*

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ful) King and/or Straub novel is a disjointed, spastic thing that hops from scene to scene without necessarily following logical progressions. The various powers with which they endow their demons and heroes are peculiarly idiosyncratic, and are forgotten and picked up again over and over again in no sensible way, depending only on which side is to emerge victorious in any given scene, no matter that it contradicts the "logic" of the "narrative." There is in fact no coherent narrative, and the distinction between hero and villain is not to be depended upon.

Hartwell says he thinks of King and Straub — and others whom he ranks as first-class, and sharply distinguished from the inept hacks being pitchforked onto the horror bandwagon by greenthirsty merchandisers — thinks of them as experimental writers, and this makes sense to me because they surely know better than to write as "badly" as they do. Hartwell presents an intriguing picture, in which this seeming ineptitude (which evokes so much positive response from so many readers) is an artistic response. Feeling something in the offing, and groping for it, King and the best of the rest are apparently far enough along to have realized that the old ways of telling a story are not for them but are not far enough along to have a clear grasp of what the best new way might be.

• • •

Despite what you may have gathered from overhearing literary analytics here and elsewhere, the creation of art is not rational, much less polite or tidy. Only the analyses have squared corners, and that person is a fool who seeks to make art by looking in a mirror at criticism. Out there somewhere is a landscape I'm satisfied Sigmund Freud only glimpsed. An interesting way to look at it is by analogy to classical Mediterranean myths. In that construct, it seems tenable that the classical Greek philosophers invented logic and reason as shields against their own childhood lore; that is, against incursions from that dark bourne whose most notable modern Columbus is Carl Jung. I do not know as much about Freud's heretical disciple Jung and what he said as I should, but my understanding is that there can be no maps per se because maps themselves are only representations of the desire to have maps regardless of whether the territory exists in any form, much less the one asserted by the "map." In that construct, the very existence of a "map" is almost certain proof that it is a lie; if that is so, then the best book bows to the notion that there are plots, but itself has as little plot as it can.

Nobody knows what vampires stand for, but everybody knows they represent something powerful. If the common effect of horror-writing is

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the denial of natural laws — and some say that's the essence of it — then a shape-changing creature represents a potent extension of that thrill.

Similarly, there is no rational explanation for the endlessly recomplicated resonances we experience at the sight, the smell, the taste or even the thought of blood. But there is something indecorous about spilt blood (as distinguished from blue blood) and opened body cavities, and extreme lack of decorum is one of the stuffs of horror.

In more decorous times . . . the times of *Dracula* and *Nosferatu* come to mind . . . the touch of blood was minimal. The prick of the fangs was neatly self-sealing; the merest trickle of carmine spotted the slim throat and encarnadined the fichu of the night-dress. "Fantasy," we could say; as we became more sophisticated, "Freudian fantasy." But in such books as S.P. Somtow's 1984 *Vampire Junction*, blood is not sealed nor sipped; it is ripped free from bodies exploded into a storm of high-pressure exudate, it is bathed in, lapped up, revelled at as if in a fountain; venture to say eaten. The stomach of a vampire in the shape of a sweet ten-year-old boy soprano can hold, in a trice, all the blood in an adult human . . . all but the portion sprayed on the walls.

Then there is the matter of body parts . . . heads, fingers, eyes, brains, arms and legs, Speaking of Mark Twain, I had thought George R.R. Martin's *Fevre Dream* to be an aberration in its assiduous pouring-out of the ruby liquid and its unflagging catalogues of mutilated bodies stacked like riven cordwood, but it was in fact simply a precursor of *Vampire Junction* in that respect.

I think significantly, Martin's other horror novel, *Armageddon Rag*, also has its echoes in Somtow's book, which Berkley has now reprinted in mass-market rack size. Somtow's vampire is, in our time, a fabulously successful rock singer, whose warm-up band, the Vultures, echoes Martin's "Nazgul." I think it significant because Somtow, a modern composer as well as a very hip lad in any number of other ways, is obviously plugged in to whatever dark archetypy has produced the punk movement and punk chic.

Somtow (who in his clever disguise as a sunny, vivacious SF writer is Somtow Sucharitkul, author of *Starship and Haiku* and *Mallworld*) toys with *Dracula* and its ambivalences ("I never drink . . . wine" [from the film] becomes a running you should excuse the expression gag), just as he tops Martin. He excourses into his own Thai ancestry apparently for the hell of it, and romps through this work on many other levels. But the graphic exsanguinations and hecatombs serve a shrewd technical purpose. There is so much blood that one soon neutralizes its effect. The

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reflex of repugnance becomes dulled. Now we can get on with it. We can bring in Gilles de Rais in all clinical detail, and the reader will not flinch (too much). We can begin to speak not of the horror of vampiric behavior but of the horror of what attracts us to it.

The plot — I think — concerns a boy singer turned into a vampire in a Roman world not yet conscious that it has arrived at its A.D. years. When we meet him, he is Timmy Valentine, rock idol literally devouring a fan magazine reporter, but in flashbacks and dissolves we come to know his history. This is in turn interwoven with his inadvertant decades-old contact with a Cambridge University group of vicious dilletante mystics called The Gods of Chaos, and with their acolyte, a young pyromaniac who by the 1980s is a mediocre classical music conductor. There is Rudy, the faithful retainer whom Timmy first met while being repeatedly gassed as a gypsy boy at Auschwitz, and Maria, the old silent screen actress at whose bloody breasts Timmy now suckles. There is Lisa, the numbbrained would-be groupie who becomes a vampire, and Brian Zottoli, her uncle, who stakes her with a broomstick and a croquet mallet.

There is Timmy's obsession with model trains and model train layouts that include Auschwitz and Bluebeard's castle; there is his possession of the town of Junction, Idaho, and the carnage that results. All these concatenate in various ways, counterpointed by Somtow's hippety-hop narrative tecnhique and his utter lack of inhibition in describing various activities that would have sent Bram Stoker retching from his inkwell. It is all a chaotic, often contrary book, and its grasp exceeds its reach. It verges on greatness on page 292, when the grandly monstrous nobleman Gilles de Rais speaks with bitter prophecy of the onsetting middle class: "In the future the man who emulates me will be a petty criminal, furtively luring his victims. . . . He will not hurl the headless corpses . . . from his bedroom window. He will inter them in secret, in cavities in the walls of privies. He will have shame . . . society's victim and his own — in short, a madman!" But by page 293 Somtow is fluffing the scene (grand in concept, perfunctory in execution) in which the vampire refuses to grant de Rais' fervid wish to be made immortally evil. It is the vampire himself who wishes to be redeemed, to attain the apotheosis that he (perhaps) eventually attains with the aid of the clapped-out old conductor and a menopausal Jungian psychiatrist at Vampire Junction.

There are tons to be learned by reading this book, and if you can hold your gorge down, a great deal of entertainment in it. It is beyond belief that anything in it reflects anything but the most sapaient planning and

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serious purpose, for all that Somtow dissembles on that point. He is a marvelously talented writer. More important, while he has not harnessed himself into a marvelously fulfilled book, he *is* freighting it, whatever it is, somewhere toward some midnight destination where the station house is only apparently the one wakeful sign in an otherwise slumbering locality.

In 1983, Michael Shea won the Howard award for the best fantasy novel of the year with *Nifft the Lean*, a DAW original paperback. Now we have *In Yana*, whose full title is *In Yana, The Touch of Undying*. If you think of DAW books primarily as a source of swashbuckling adventure — albeit some of it, particularly by C. J. Cherryh, is exceedingly well told — you are as apt to miss Shea again as you have been up to now. Please don't.

In Yana, like *Nifft*, is set in a world that remarkably resembles Gene Wolfe's in superficial details. But unlike that SF milieu of fantastically advanced human day, Shea's is Hell, nor are any of his protagonists out of it except provisionally. His world is but a crust, and the hideous creatures that lurk below have the overwhelming advantage that they do not merely dabble; their puissance makes mock of the human tendency to perform sins and call them evils.

This one is not as good as earlier Shea, particularly toward the end. It is a simple picaresque novel about a pudgy scholar-manque whose various venalities lead him step by step toward the legendary land of Yana where the "touch of undying" is to be had, has one the stomach for the intervening travails and the varied nauseations that increasingly attend approaching success. It tries to be more than simple, but for all its decorations it goes banal at the end. Toward that end, even such scenes as the construction and launching of the *Necronaut* to navigate the oceans of death fall a bit woodenly on the ear.

Nevertheless, meanwhile one of the most interesting and apt horror writers of our time is deploying his dark sails upon an ocean without bounds. This is minor Michael Shea when all's said, but it is Michael Shea, as indubitably present as a stake through the brain, as promising of a great career in a major literature of our time, however repugnant that may be.

We will be going on with this study, next month.

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Vance Aandahl is a long-time contributor to F&SF, publishing a variety of excellent work here from 1960 to 1976. Since then, silence. But we are delighted to report that the ten year hiatus has ended with the publication of this amusing tale of alien invasion and the purchase of another, longer SF story that will be along in a few months. A real pleasure to have him back.

Midnight Snack

BY
VANCE AANDAHL

Shifting into undermode, Zarjackyl shut down the photon drive and focused all seventeen of his eyes on that yummy blue and green planet shimmering on the viewscreen, then turned to Byxl with a sneer of triumph.

"Just as I predicted. She's a beauty — the *ideal* hatchery."

"Yes, Your Awesomeness. You were right."

"Your tone of voice displeases me, Byxl. Are you insinuating I might have been anything other than right? Am I not Zarjackyl 86421774, Senior Ranger in the Dream Police with a black belt in mental torture, not to mention Empirical Commander of the hatchery vessel *Pillager*?"

"I wasn't thinking, radical one!"

Whimpering, Byxl threw himself down and gave the tip of Zarjackyl's anterior tentacle a slobbery kiss.

"Forgive me, Your Superciliousness!"

"I shall be merciful this time, underling. Do not let it happen again."

Zarjackyl swung his eyestalks back to the screen. For a moment he just squatted there, scratching a pustule on his brainpod and gazing with lust at the cloudy wet virgin before him. Then he nodded both antennae at Byxl and chuckled wickedly, his lips foaming with green saliva.

"Commence descent. Once I find a suitable host, you can prepare the eggs, underling. And then — Earth will be ours! Har de har har!"

"Fire it shitlips heave it get it off dart it OH NO you dumb fuck I don't buhLEEVE it!"

George Smallpelter threw his beer can at the wall and sank back into the overstuffed magenta armchair he'd

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positioned just inches in front of the TV. John Elway was crawling out from underneath a pile of Bengal linebackers.

"Get your head outta your ass, you bozo! You're so sleepy your eyelids look like Big Macs!"

"How refined, Daddy."

"You make us so proud."

George whipped his head around so fast he wrenched his neck. There stood Sheena and Rochelle. Two days ago they'd come home with punk haircuts, and the sight still made his sinuses ache. Sheena was shaved bald except for a blueberry mohawk. Rochelle had a crown of spikes in alternating candy pink and pumpkin orange.

"I thought you kids went to the Hate Baby concert."

"They canceled it — Truman Capote died. Who gives a rat's ass anyway. What we want are front-row seats for Michael Jackson."

"That way we'll be in a highly visible position to make a strong Dadaistic statement about his pseudo androgyny."

"Yeah, We can puke on the stage"

"Sounds lovely, young ladies. Where you gonna get the money for the tickets?"

"On East Colfax."

"Yeah. We're gonna perform perverted acts with old men."

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Why do you treat us so sarcastically? What have *you* ever done? You talk about how stoned and holy and free you were at Woodstock, but all we ever see around here is never any pot or acid, just a shitpile of empty beer cans."

George belched. He could feel his face heating up. "O.K., Ro — if you wanna play hardball, that's fine with me. You know what you are? You're a spoiled little brat. That's spoiled with a capital S. Bad salami."

"You are the most sarcastic—"

"Do you mind? I'm trying to watch the goddam Broncos, for crisake! I've missed two plays already! Is that enough? Can we all just shut up, O.K.? I mean, why should my game be ruined just because your concert got canceled?"

The Donks had taken a time out. It was Miller time on the tube. George pulled another Lite from his ice chest.

"Who'd you say died?"

"Truman Capote."

"Capote, huh? He was a pro wrestler, right?"

"Pro wrestler?"

"Daddy — you are *stupid*."

George popped the tab and took a long tingling swallow of the cold and bubbly.

"Stupid? If I'm stupid, what are you? Your IQ is so low that—"

"What a moron. What an intellectual troglodyte. Calling Truman Capote a professional wrestler."

"Capote and Vidal — they were big in the fifties, a great tag team. They perfected the top-rope entry

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leap, the bolo punch, the piledriver pin — you name a move, those guys had it down pat. This was back when pro wrestling was really pro wrestling."

"Daddy, you're drunk. Truman Capote and Gore Vidal couldn't possibly have been wrestlers. They—"

"You wanna bet, young lady? I've got two boxfuls of magazines in the basement. I think a few action glossies of Boomin' Truman and Gorgeous Gore might just settle the argument."

"You're on."

"Yeah."

"If I'm right, you kids have to mow the lawn for a year." George rose a few inches out of his chair and gave them a wicked smile. "And weed the garden. And take out the trash. And shovel the walks. You still wanna bet?"

"What if you're wrong?"

"Yeah — whatta we win if we win?"

"Who cares? Whatta ya want?"

"I dunno."

"How 'bout those Jackson tickets?"

"Jackson tickets?" George snickered. "No problem."

"You'll stand in line and get us front-row seats?"

"Sure. I'll eat my socks too. Does it matter? You ain't gonna win."

"Win? win what?"

D.M. appeared in the doorway. She was wearing an elegant calf-length eggshell-white lace dress with black net stockings. Cocking an eyebrow, she tried to look sophisticated, innocent, rich, aloof, bored, and sensuous all at the same time.

"It's a bet. Dum-dum here thinks Truman Capote and Gore Vidal were pro wrestlers. We say he's wrong."

"Yeah. We say he's fulla shit."

D.M. shot Sheena a look that'd freeze a bowl of chili, then tossed back her hair and pouted at George.

"You've been hitting the suds again, Poppa Frog."

Whenever D.M. called him Poppa Frog, it reminded George of when she was a baby. Instantly he felt all soft and nostalgic and fatherly. He belched again, then went into his famous comic amphibian routine.

"Ribbet ribbet."

Bulging his eyes, he shot forth his tongue.

"Ribbet ribbet ribbet."

D.M. rewarded froggy with a loving laugh, but then Rochelle spoiled his fun by shoving the front page of the newspaper in his face. Sagging like a carcass on the hook, he read the dreadful news.

"So this Capote never wrestled, huh?"

"No — tap dancing was more his style. Pay up, garagehead."

"Yeah, pay up."

"Hey, come on, what's the big deal? You're not serious? I'll tell ya what we can do—"

"What *you* can do, darling Daddy, is fork over a pair of front-row Michael Jackson Victory Concert Seats."

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"You kids tricked me into this! I never—"

"Oh, yes, you most certainly did."

Flossie Kay emerged from the kitchen with a plate of cold ribs in one hand and a bowl of passion fruit sherbet in the other. In her pink flannel nightie, she looked like a pygmy hippo.

"You made a bet and you lost, and you'd admit it and pay up if you weren't a worthless sniveling deadbeat."

"But—"

"You're a coward, George. You're a coward and a liar and a welcher and a no-good beer drunk and a bad-check bouncer and a loudmouth braggart. I think that about sums it up. You owe the girls those tickets, and unless you deliver, you're *dog doo on toast* in my book."

She passed through the living room into the master bedroom. He heard the waterbed gulp and gasp when she landed on it. His heart was beating so hard it felt like it was going to kick out the sides of his head. He roared up from the cushiony sanctuary of his favorite chair.

"O.K. SURE I'll buy those goddamn tickets because you won the goddamn bet sure sure sure you won it fair and square. I was just wrong, that's all. Goddamn it, I'll go right now."

He chugged the rest of his Lite, then hurled the can at the wall.

"I'll buy you your goddamn tickets, and they'll be in the goddamn front row because I'm gonna be in the goddamn front of that line. I'm going down there right now!"

"Please, Poppa Frog, try to relax! Remember your blood pressure! Besides, the ticket office doesn't open till ten tomorrow morning!"

Pursing her lips in a moue, D.M. showed him her profile. George caught a whiff of French perfume.

"You'll be up all night, Poppa Frog!"

"Goddamn right!"

Beet red, he hurled himself out the front door.

Sheena sidled over to the TV and flicked it to a different channel. Just as Elway handed off to Sammy Winder, the new Baboon Heart video hit the screen — a slow-motion hog-skinning scene with an orchestra of electronic harps in the background. She turned to D.M. and curled back her lips in a snarl.

"Where ya been, Dawn Moonchild? Out practicing your Brooke Shields on some wino in the park?"

"Please don't call me that."

"Dawn Moonchild? Why not? It's your name, isn't it?"

"Nyaah!" sneered Rochelle. "Dawn *Moon*child, Dawn *Moon*child, Dawn *Moon*child!"

"You nasty little bitches! I'm gonna beat the crap out of you!"

"Ya hafta catch us first, lardtits!"

"Yeah — if your hips still work!"

Jeering, Sheena and Rochelle flew out the back door. D.M. heaved a sigh, turned off the TV, then stood

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there stunned by the sudden silence, unsure what to do next, lost without an audience, her Hollywood image melting in the heat.

"But Your Ethereal Grandiloquence, I don't understand. What makes one host better than another?"

"We need a creature of low moral intelligence, Byxl. A vile being driven by anger, envy, gluttony, and lust. A creature whose wounded soul oozes spiritual pus. A proud creature, Byxl. A creature full of sloth and despair."

"Despair's the really bad one, right?"

"No, Byxl — it's pride that heads the list."

Zarjackyl flexed his thoracic membrane and stroked his gill whiskers. He felt strong, invincible, cosmic— the lord of all egg hatchers.

"Pride, Byxl, pride — we must beware of it in ourselves and seek it out in our prey."

With a haughty flourish the Empirical Commander slid across the cabin to the viewscreen, his tentacles leaving a trail of sticky secretions on the floor behind him. The image of that lush virgin planet was growing ever larger. All seventeen of his eyeballs protruded greedily from their sockets.

"Yes, Byxl — I hope to find a host who is corrupt and depraved in every aspect of his character, but it's especially important that his petty ego be swollen with pride. . ."

This is ridiculous, thought George Smallpelter. A person of my status shouldn't have to stand in line with a bunch of mindless teenyboppers. It's beneath my dignity. After all — I *am* the assistant manager at Shoe World.

He eased his blue and beige Toyota station wagon into the Sports Arena parking lot. Locking the doors, he looked across the lot and saw that a sizable line had already formed in front of the ticket office.

Christ on a crutch — get here eighteen hours ahead of time and you're still too late for front-row seats.

Half a dozen other fools were in the process of parking. By sprinting hard he beat them all, reaching the line just ahead of two little old ladies in wheelchairs.

"Would you look at that, Olympia! That ruffian cut right in front of us."

"I can see him too, Hermione. You don't have to shout. I'm not deaf."

"A taste of my cane might teach you some manners, young man. What do you have to say for yourself?"

George was gasping for breath.

"Well, young man — speak up!"

Hermione brandished the business end of a brierwood knobkerrie in front of his nose. She had a blue beehive hairdo and more wrinkles than a bulldog.

"Leave him alone," snapped Olym-

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pia, who was bald except for a few white fluffs around her leathery brown ears. "He won't make it through the night anyway."

Just my luck, thought George. All day long at the store, I have to put up with one old biddy after another, and now I'm stuck in line with two classics.

Grumbling at each other, they set about unpacking the saddlebags on their wheelchairs. Out came a nylon tent, sleeping bags with foam pads, a storm lantern, a Coleman stove, a bulging Styrofoam chest, three thermoses, a barbecue grill, a sack of charcoal briquettes, a can of lighter fluid, a portable TV, some copies of *National Enquirer* and *Soldier of Fortune,* a dog-eared Bible, a card table, two decks of cards, and some poker chips.

Suddenly a tremendous blast of sound hit George on the back of the head. He staggered around and gawked at four black kids who stood ahead of him in line. They couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve years old. They wore coordinating porkpie hats, parachute suits with breakdancing pads on the elbows and knees, and black high-top basketball shoes with untied green and red Scotch plaid laces. Unlike Hermione and Olympia, they'd brought only one piece of equipment — but it was large enough to pass for a bar fridge and had more dials than a NASA control panel. They'd cranked up the volume so high the surface of the parking lot was shaking like a vibrator.

Holy shit. I bet that sucker takes five hundred batteries. Play it any louder and I'll lose my fillings.

George craned his neck to look farther ahead. There appeared to be about forty or fifty people ahead of him in line.

The paper said you can buy up to six tickets. I bet every one of these jerks wants his full quota. I don't have a chance for front-row seats.

Gesticulating with both arms, he motioned at the black kids to turn down their ghettoblaster.

"Whus the matter, man?"

"Don't you dig the Wailers?"

"Don' you dig roots rock reggae?"

"Whus your problem, man?"

"I just wanna ask you guys a question. I was wondering how many tickets you were going to buy and—"

"Whus you want, man?"

"You wanna buy some tickets?"

"Two hundred apiece, man."

"Cash, man."

"No no no — I was just wondering whether there'll be any front-row seats left when I get to the front of the line. I didn't mean to—"

"Maybe we should give this motherfucker a Montebello massage. Whus you think, Clarence?"

"I don't know, Leroy. Maybe you're right. Maybe we should put the leather to this motherfucker. Whus you think, Dexter?"

"Whus I think? I think maybe we

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should fry this motherfucker's eyeballs in turpentine. Whus you think, Lafayette?"

"This ain't no motherfucker."

Lafayette tipped back his head to look George over, then adjusted his elbow pads.

"He can't be no motherfucker cuz he ain't got no mother. He was born from a dog's ass."

D.M. sat slumped on the sofa. The more she thought about her little sisters, the angrier she became. In the back of her mind, Rochelle's voice kept chanting "Dawn *Moon*child" over and over again. Covering her face with her hands, she choked back a sob.

Those vicious little punks! They know how much that upsets me.

Rubbing away her tears, she stared blankly at the threadbare nap of the carpet.

Oh, well. I suppose it could be worse. The Easely twins' real names are Nirvana Mandala and Peyote Song. That's what we get for being born in 1968. What a lousy year.

She stood up and cast a sorrowful eye at the bathroom. Soon the mirror would reveal the condition of her mascara.

But why should I feel so darn sorry for myself? It's Daddy who has to stand in line all night and—

I know! I'll fill up that old wicker picnic basket with goodies! Then when I get back from my date with Chuck, I can borrow Mom's car and take the basket to Daddy. He'll get a big picnic lunch for a midnight snack!

She spun her skirt, then headed for the kitchen, pausing in the dining nook to admire her father's collection of rural American beer bottles. Four display cases held 137 different brands. There were bottles of every size, shape, and color, each in pristine mint condition. Pork Root, Yoknapatawpha, Squirrel Beak — you name it. George Smallpelter had it.

Dancing into the kitchen, D.M. flicked her skirt flirtatiously at the blender, then stood there with one forefinger just brushing her lips.

Now what does Poppa Frog like to eat best of all? He likes fried chicken and burgers and egg rolls and pizza and burritos and spaghetti and ice cream and doughnuts. And beer. I better put a six-pack in with the food.

She scanned the fridge: not much, but. . . .

Guacomole sandwiches! I'll make 'em spicy the way Poppa Frog likes!

Zarjackyl leaned forward and concentrated all his intellect, experience, and general all-around moxie on making a perfect descent. He was so good at piloting these midrange hatchery vessels, just thinking about it made the cilia stand up on his neck frill.

"This dirty brown cloud — what is it, supreme one?"

"Smog, Byxl."

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"Smog?"

"Yes, smog — an aerial excretion. These creatures have machines that fill the air with gaseous wastes."

"The air they breathe? Oh, how disgusting!"

Nauseated, Byxl stretched out his eyestalks, then let them snap back, bathing his eyeballs in pink mucus. The sight gave Zarjackyl an orgasm. He shuddered twice and a dribble of slimy green semen oozed out of his egg pouch. Then he got control of himself.

"Steel yourself, Byxl. These are unclean creatures."

"I can't wait any longer. I've really gotta go. Won't you *please* hold my place in line?"

George was desperate. Those Lites he'd tossed down during the Broncos game were conspiring to rupture his bladder.

"Fair is fair, young man. If you leave your place in line, then you'll lose it." Hermione shook her cane at him. "You should know that. Just look around you. Everybody else was sensible enough to come with a partner. That way, if you have to relieve yourself, your partner can hold your spot."

"But . . . but . . ."

"No buts about it, young man. Let this be a lesson to you."

"Can't we *please* make some sort of deal?"

George stood bent forward at the waist, his thighs clamped together and his fists clenched. He knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

"*Please* . . . I'll do anything you say . . . I'll . . . I'll even *pay* you . . ."

"Now you're talking, young man.

"How much?"

"Would . . . would five dollars . . ."

"Twenty-five."

"What?"

"You heard me, young man. Twenty-five. Take it or leave it."

"That's highway robbery!"

"Twenty-five. In cash. In advance."

"All right already! I'll pay it!"

George pulled a twenty and a five out of his money clip and threw them down on Hermione's lap.

"But you ladies should be ashamed of yourselves!"

When he returned, drained of urine and emotion, Hermione gave him a coy smile.

"I do hope you feel more comfortable now that you've gone wee-wee, young man."

He gave her a surly grunt.

"Olympia and I have decided we may have been too harsh in our initial judgment of your character."

Coquettishly, Hermione patted her blue beehive.

"We've decided you deserve a chance to win your money back."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. You see, we were hoping ever so much that you'd join us for a friendly hand or two of cards. It's so much more fun when three play in-

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stead of just two."

"What kind of cards? Old Maid?"

"Poker."

"Poker?" George tried not to sound too interested. "Well, sure, I suppose I might play, just to while away the time. Fifty-cent limit?"

"Table stakes." Hermione smiled slyly. "With a hundred-dollar buy-in."

"The joker's wild with aces, straights, and flushes." Olympia was busy counting out stacks of chips. "And you can go both ways with a wheel."

Swallowing hard, George reached for his money clip.

Sheena pulled open the screen door, took a quick peek into the kitchen, then grinned back at Rochelle.

"Coast's clear, sister dear."

Stealthily they crept across the tile floor to the refrigerator.

"Man, do I ever have the munchies."

"No shit. I could eat an elephant's abortion."

"Hey look — what's this?"

"The picnic basket's loaded!"

"Check this stuff out — there's chips and cookies and beer and sandwiches and—"

"Sandwiches? What kind?"

"I dunno. Let's see."

Sheena popped the Glad wrap on the first sandwich in a stack of six, then spread the bread.

"Mexican snot."

"Mmm. Gimme one."

"Get your own."

"What if that's the only good one?" Rochelle snatched up the second sandwich and frantically unpeeled it. "What if all the rest are contaminated lunch meat? What if —" She cut herself off with a deep bite that sent an avalance of guacamole down each side of her chin.

Sheena's left hand was feeding the first sandwich into her mouth while her right hand unwrapped number three.

"D.M. made these for dear old Poppa Frog."

"Who cares."

For a few minutes neither spoke. They were locked in a heavyweight power-eating contest, their cheeks bulging, their foreheads glistening with sweat. Sheena wolfed down more of the sandwiches, but Ro put away most of the chips.

"Burp . . ."

"Gorp . . .urf . . ."

For a moment they just stood there eyeing each other like a pair of obese penguins.

"D.M.'s gonna kill us."

"Maybe we better make some more sandwiches."

"What about the chips?"

"Strictly a misdemeanor. She probably won't even notice they're missing. But we'll get ten to twenty for pigging those sandwiches. I don't want to, but let's do it."

There's plenty of bread and stuff, but no more avocados. How we gon-

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na make the guacamole? We're screwed."

"Screwed, my sweet ass. Grab that Tupperware bowl and go out back."

"What for?"

"The tomato plants in Mommy's garden — they're crawling with big green caterpillars." Sheena ran both hands through her mohawk and chortled like the Marquis de Sade. "You fill up the bowl, and I'll do the rest . . ."

"Look, Your Supreme Aloofness — the Earth creatures are standing in a long line. Are they slave drones waiting to go to work in the goonatonium mines? Or tax evaders waiting to be tossed into the Public Shredder?"

"No, Byxl. Those poor devils face a much crueler fate — an equisitely painful form of torture called a Jackson concert."

"What's it like?"

"Don't ask. It's too horrible to describe. Just help me scan the line with our depravity sensors."

Zarjackyl swung five eyes around to check the corruption gauge on the *Pillager's* command console.

"Har. Look! That fat one down there registers 99.85 on the Trivial Wickedness Scale! He's the host we want!"

George glanced at his cards, then squinted at Hermione and Olympia.

Kings over eights. A full boat at last. Just keep a straight face.

They'd been playing for three hours. After a run of incredibly bad luck, he was $240 down, but now . . .

"It's my turn to open the betting, isn't it. Very well. I'll wager twenty dollars." With a steely-eyed scowl, Hermione counted out her chips.

"I'm in," announced Olympia, adding her own chips to the pile.

Nervously, George yawned. He sneaked a peek at his cards, jerked his eyes away and yawned again.

"Well, young man?"

"Well, young man?"

For some time now an insect had been buzzing around George's right ear. He swatted at it, then yawned again. Suddenly he felt something hot whir over his tongue. His mouth slapped shut and he tried to spit it out, but it was already down his throat.

JEEZUS! I just swallowed a goddamn bug!

"Young man, either call my bet . . ." Hermione glared at him. ". . . or fold."

"I'll see that twenty . . ." George swallowed hard. His hands were shaking. ". . . and raise you eighty more."

"But Your Divine Overbearance, where are we now? Is this some sort of immense cavern? And what is that noxious yellow sea bubbling and boiling below us?"

"We have invaded the alimentary canal of our host, Byxl, and now find

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ourselves inside an organ known as the stomach. What you have mistaken for a sea is in fact a deadly mixture of alcohol, bile, and digestive acids."

"Great Brutalio! Then why are we flying so low?"

"I'm searching . . ."

Zarjackyl rotated eight of his eye stalks to scrutinize the viewscreen.

"Har! There's one now!"

"What?"

Pink mucus flew in all directions as Byxl shot his eyestalks toward the screen. Zarjackyl felt another orgasm coming on, but this time he controlled it.

"Look over there, Byxl, to starboard. Do you see it? That oozing moist spot in the wall of the stomach?"

"What is it?"

"It's called an ulcer, underling, but for us, for us it is the gate to paradise — our means of entering our host's circulatory system and proceeding to his brain. Once there— Earth will be ours!. Har de har har!"

George stared at his checkbook in disbelief, then hung his head.

Five hundred and twelve fucking dollars. How the hell am I gonna explain this to Flossie Kay? She'll saw off my balls with a butter knife and shove 'em down the disposal.

Slowly he lifted his head and looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight. The line stretched far behind him now, snaking back and forth across the parking lot. A few radios still played softly, but most of the faithful had curled up in sleeping bags and were trying to rest.

Suddenly a roaring symphony of engines ruptured the silence. Waves of headlights came pouring off Federal Boulevard down past the parking lot. Under the eerie green glow of the mercury-vapor streetlamps, George recognized Colorado's most dreaded outlaw motorcycle gang — the Sons of Sartre. There must have been fifty or sixty of those mean bastards on their big-ass Harleys and rebuilt Indians, their beer bottles held high and glinting in the darkness, their beards whipping back behind them like Z.Z. Top battle banners. And chugging up the middle of the street in the opposite direction came a rickety old wooden van — with its lights off.

George felt extraordinarily calm, as though he were dreaming or watching a bad movie. The van veered sharply to the left, jolting over the curb, bouncing off a telephone pole, teetering on two wheels, then banging over on its side as the surging vanguard of sociopaths swept past and disappeared into the night. For a moment the van just lay there, one of its wheels still spinning. Then with a creak the back fell open and two Bengal tigers crawled out.

Even at a distance of fifty yards, George could tell one of the big cats was hurt. It held its head at a crazy angle and walked backward in circles. The other watched it closely, then swatted at it with a paw. Instant-

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ly they were at each other's throats, snarling and biting and clawing, rolling across the asphalt in a furious embrace. Abruptly they broke apart. For a moment they hissed and spat at each other. Then they turned and stared at the line of people, their demented yellow eyes glittering with confusion and rage.

Sweet Mother of God, thought George. They're looking at *me*!

The stillness was awful. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. George felt dizzy and faint. His rib cage constricted till he couldn't breathe.

Then, with their heads lowered and their shoulder muscles bunched up in the classic feline stalking posture, in perfect unison the two tigers each took a slow, slinky, sinister step forward toward the line.

"Run for it!" shrieked a high-pitched voice.

Pandemonium ensued. Numbly, George realized that screaming Jackson fans were fleeing in all directions, sprinting for the safety of their cars. He wanted to scream and run too. But he couldn't. He was paralyzed with fear.

The two big Bengals sprang forward in tandem, charging straight toward him. He knew they were coming at full speed, but his frozen mind watched them in ultra slow motion: he could count every whisker, every tooth, every foamy fleck of saliva as they loomed boundingly larger in his field of vision. Only once before had he felt the same nearness of death — back in 1966, when the draft board had sent him an invitation to join the party in 'Nam. He'd gotten out of that one by jumping barefoot up and down on a concrete floor for five hours the night before his physical. What could possibly save him now?

Dimly, as though from a great distance, George heard voices:

"Those motherfuckers look hungry, man!"

"Whus we gonna do? I don' wanna get eaten! Maybe by Tina Turner, man, but not by Tony the Tiger!"

"Whatever you do, don' break and run — we'll lose our spot in line!"

"Quick, Leroy — turn the volume up on the boom box! Maybe we can drive 'em off with the Wailers."

But Leroy wasn't quick enough. Already striped death in duplicate was soaring through the air, soaring forward with claws extended, soaring—

BANG! BANG!

In mid-leap the crazed carnivores twisted back wildly and fell to the asphalt. One of them died before it dropped, landing with a soft plop like a sack of rotten potatoes. The other lay there for a moment, its flank heaving. Then it belched blood and staggered to its feet.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The top of its head disappeared in a shower of bone fragments and brains. Crossing its legs like a drunken sailor, it collapsed sideways over the

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body of its mate.

Dumbstruck, George turned around to see who his savior was. There sat Hermione in her wheelchair, the butt of a nickel-plated Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum clasped firmly in both hands. With a cool smile she lifted it to her lips and blew a wisp of smoke away from the barrel, just like Stewart Granger in *King Solomon's Mines*.

"Let this be a lesson to you, young man. Never venture into the inner city unarmed."

"Good shootin', Herm!" cackled Olympia.

"It makes me sick the way these pinko politicians keep trying to take away our precious right to bear arms." Hermione dropped the gun into a silver-sequined purse and snapped shut the clasp. "All I can say is, they better not come snooping around the Shady Deal Retirement Home."

"Look, man!" cried Lafayette. "The whole front of the line ran away. Let's move up before those chickenshits come back."

In one smooth move, Clarence, Leroy, Dexter, and Lafayette hoisted their enormous radio off the ground and sprinted for the ticket window. George got there right behind them, but Hermione and Olympia were lost in the scramble as scores of shameless cowards came racing back from their cars. Within a few seconds a new line had formed — and this time George was in fifth place.

Hot damn — those front-row seats were in the bag now!

Looking back, he saw a figure crawl out of the van and come hobbling toward the line. A little man wearing purple carnival pantaloons and a huge Stromboli mustache gazed down at the dead tigers, then lifted his fists overhead and cried out in a voice stricken with anguish, "Carmen! Pagliacci! My darlings! What have they done to you?" With a heartrending sob, he threw himself across their corpses.

"Let us into the line, young man." Hermione jabbed George in the ribs with the business end of her cane. "Let us in this instant!"

"Nothing doing, lady." A big pimply kid squeezed up close behind George. He was wearing a black T-shirt with a "B. F. Deal" monogrammed on it. "Line forms at the rear." He cocked his thumb over his shoulder and laughed. "About three blocks back."

"You shut your mouth!" Olympia edged forward till the footrest of her weelchair was cutting into B.F.'s ankles. "This is our spot!"

"Of course it is, Aunt Olympia." George leaned over and gave her wizened brown shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Then he turned on B.F. "I should make you apologize for speaking like that to my mother and her sister. But instead I'm going to assume it was just a misunderstanding. Now please step back and stop trying

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to crowd into our family's place in line."

"Your family?" B.F. scowled. "How many more?"

"This is it. Just me and Mom and Aunt Olympia."

For a moment B.F. looked puzzled. Then his face split into a big goofy grin.

"Sorry, man. Like you say — just a misunderstanding."

He pushed back, buckling the line, Hermione and Olympia had enough room to position their wheelchairs behind George. Hermione motioned for George to bend over so she could whisper in his ear.

"That was clever thinking on your part, young man. Now if you'd just be kind enough to go back and gather up our belongings—"

"I'll be delighted to — for 512 clams. Otherwise you might as well gather them up yourself and head for the end of the line, cuz you ain't gonna be my momma no more."

"This is outrageous!" Hermione sputtered with such vehemence that it made her beehive vibrate. "We won that money fair and square in an honest game of chance. You're trying to blackmail us!"

"Tell ya what, you sleazy old whore. You return my checks and I'll let you keep the cash."

George was thinking fast. He'd lost four hundred dollars in checks, and Flossie Kay kept an eagle's eye on the checkbook. It was essential he retrieve those four foolishly signed slips of paper. At the same time he was prepared to forget about the $112 in cash. It had come from his private money clip. He kept two clips — a clip with a few ones and a five that he occasionally flashed in the presence of Flossie Kay and the kids, and then his private clip, which they never saw, and which was usually loaded with twenties he'd embezzled from Shoe World.

"You drive a hard bargain, young man." Hermione glared at him with undisguised loathing. "I hope you rot in hell." She dipped into her purse, and for one hideous moment, George was certain she was going to pull out her gun. But instead, with a gesture of disdain, she let the checks fall from her fingers and flutter to the ground. "It doesn't matter anyway. I'm sure they would've bounced."

This is it, Bixl. Prepare the eggs."

"Here? In this region of mushy gray pulp?"

"Yes, Bryxl. We have journeyed deep into our host's central nervous system. That 'pulp,' as you naively refer to it, is brain tissue."

"Really? It looks so limp — so lifeless and flaccid."

"True, but those are precisely the qualities we seek. Only this sort of brain can provide our hatchlings with the balanced nutrition they'll need during the critical stages of their early

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childhood development." Zarjackyl paused to eye a monitor. "According to my calculations, there's enough tissue inside our host's skull to feed the hatchlings for nearly three months. By then they'll be strong enough to venture forth on their own. They'll come swarming out of his eye sockets and nostrils, out of his mouth and ears, dispersing in all directions in search of new hosts. These hosts— they scream when their brains are being eaten. Did you know that, Byxl?"

"A glorious prospect, Your Mercifulness."

"It's the only thing left in my life that gives me any pleasure, underling. Quickly now — load the first batch of eggs into the ejaculatron."

"Guess who, Poppa Frog!"

The sudden, unexpected feel of D.M.'s soft hands covering his eyes from behind gave George an exceptional thrill.

"Ribbet! Ribbet ribbet!"

D.M. was the only female in the world whom he loved. Blustering with joy, he wheeled around to embrace her. She was wearing a tight bodice of Swedish lace, Sherpa pants, and calf-length artificial alligator-skin boots.

"What are you doing here, sweetheart?"

"It's a midnight snack, Poppa Frog!"

She held the old Smallpelter family picnic basket under his nose. The warp of the wicker entranced him: he remembered once when his grandmother had loaded it with Virginia ham and Jewish rye and Granny Smith apples, and another time when his mom, his *real* mom, not this godawful Hermione, had filled it to overflowing with home-baked gingersnaps. These memories goaded George into a feeding frenzy, and he flung open the basket's lid with both hands.

"Guacamole sandwiches, Poppa Frog — your *faves!*"

After stripping away the Glad wrap, George used his forefinger to scoop up an oozed-out blob of guacamole. It appeared bright green with a nice splash of red and some translucent white chunks.

"I see you made it with lots of chopped tomato and onion — thanks, sweetheart."

With a dramatic flourish he sucked the green blob off his finger.

"Yum yum *yummy! This stuff is great!*"

He paused to lick his lips.

"It has a lively flavor . . . moves around on my tongue . . ."

"Oh, Poppa Frog," gushed D.M., I'm *so* glad you like it!"

Grunting with pleasure like a pig during sex, George lifted the first sandwich and was about to sink his dentures into it when a fat man in an olive suit walked out of the ticket office carrying a loudspeaker and looking scared shitless even though surrounded by a bodyguard of ten Ninjas.

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"Uh . . . I'm afraid we have some . . . uh . . . bad news for you . . . uh . . . folks who've . . . uh . . . who've waited here so patiently for . . . uh. . . ."

"Whus you tryin' to say, man?" cried Dexter.

"Yeah!" B.F. was draining a flask of vodka. "Get to the point, asshole!"

"Well . . . uh . . . well . . . uh well, the concert's canceled and . . . uh. . . ."

"Canceled?"

"Well . . . uh . . . well, Michael said . . . he said Denver is too uncivilized a city . . . uh . . . so he's . . . uh . . . he's shifted the performance date to . . . uh . . . to Cleveland and . . . uh. . . ."

"CANCELED?"

"Yes . . . but. . . ."

With many angry shouts the line surged forward. Brandishing *numchuks* and Chinese stars, the Ninjas formed a tight protective circle around the fat man.

"No!" cried George. "NO!"

His head felt hot as an oven.

"Poppa Frog, please remember your blood pressure! Please don't—"

"NOOOOOO!"

"Why are the alarms ringing? The whole ship is on lavender alert!"

"It's hard to believe, Byxl, but apparently our host is far more intelligent than I realized. He has somehow detected our presence and is attempting to implode the *Pillager* by increasing the fluid pressure inside his skull!"

"But that'll crush the eggs!"

"Never mind the eggs, you fool! What about *us*?"

"We'll be squished like bugs!"

"What do you mean, *like* bugs? We *are* bugs!"

"Look — the hull is starting to cave in! No! NO! NOOOOOO!"

Zarjackyl felt another orgasm coming on, but did he have time enough to enjoy it?

"Good-bye, cruel universe!"

SQUISH!

"D.M., sweetheart — you're so good to me. Ribbet. Ribbet ribbet ribbet."

George lay flat on his back on the hard asphalt, his head cushioned in his eldest daughter's lap. Everyone else had gone home long ago. He could even see a star or two through the smog.

"Don't clown around, Daddy. It scares me when your blood pressure flares up."

"No harm, no foul. Right now, sweetheart, I feel strong enough to take on Lyle Alzado."

"Poor Poppa Frog." She started to give him a neck rub. "It *has* been an awful night, hasn't it?"

"Naw — the old frog knows how to roll with the punches."

"Wanna eat your lunch?"

George lifted his head to eye the stack of sandwiches, then belched. The belch tasted funny.

"Naw. You know I always lose my appetite. But I've figured what to do."

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"What's that?"

Her nimble fingers were massaging the tension out of his neck, and it made the old brain hum.

"Sheena and Rochelle — they're gonna be upset when they find the concert's been canceled, right? They'll probably try to blame it on me, but I'm tired of fighting with them."

He sighed. A profound sense of tranquillity, of oneness with the universe, suffused his body.

"So why not give them a peace offering? You know — something nice, something they'll really enjoy . . . just to soften the bad news and show 'em we love 'em even though sometimes they act like a pair of vicious little ratbitches."

"But *what*, Poppa Frog? I don't get it."

"All these great sandwiches. You know those two rascals like to be pulled out of bed for a midnight snack."

With a weak flop of his arm, he touched the rim of the wicker basket. He knew D.M. would be overwhelmed by the melodrama of the gesture, and she was. He'd given it a nuance of pathetic strength, like an alcoholic priest providing Holy Communion for some Indian deep in the jungle. He eyed the stack of sandwiches for a bit longer than D.M. might have expected, then spoke in an oddly slurred voice:

"And they *love* guacamole."

Coming soon

Next month: "Uncle Tuggs," a story that is at the same time one of the most horrifying and hilarious tales we've read in ages, from none other than **Michael Shea**. Also, a new Ben Jolson story from **Ron Goulart**, new stories by **John Brunner** and **Harry Harrison**, and much more. The May issue is on sale April 1.

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In which a derelict with a knack for finding lost pets responds to a lost dog ad and tracks down the pooch, a strange looking beast indeed, with orange tongue and webbed feet. . .

Serendipity

BY

LARRY TRITTEN

Before I became a derelict, I remember how I used to sometimes wonder while passing through Skid Row why there were so few adventurous bums willing to venture to other parts of the city, why one seldom if ever saw an enterprising bum in one of the outer neighborhoods where he could look for money in the coin-return slots of telephones and newspaper boxes with minimal competition and pick leisurely through refuse that remained untouched by anyone else. Once, in a casino at Lake Tahoe, it occurred to me that a bum might consider such a place virtually paradisiacal, a sort of worldly version of the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the bum's archetypal paradise: throughout the sprawling environs of a major hotel casino, from its restaurant and lounge areas to the main room, and in its many corridors, there were *always* an illimitable number of abandoned and half-full drinks, half-smoked cigarettes, and plates of food only partially eaten; and the constant crowds would make it easy for an only slightly shabbily dressed person to circulate unmolested, thriving happily on the bountiful leftovers.

Perhaps I used to ponder this lack of initiative among society's drones and mendicants because I secretly suspected that one day I would join their ranks, as indeed I have. Given my social outlook, this devolution was probably inevitable. I never had a specific professional ambition, and in the late sixties I took to the communal bohemian scene like a mallard to a marsh, grew happy and indolent on the free love and cheerful atmosphere; in those days I made such money as I needed by delivering circulars and shopping newspapers with the winos

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and doing odd jobs (painting, moving, etc.); there were a couple of periods when I lived with a woman and attempted to make a formal transition to straight jobs. I tried the full-time-job scenario as an exterminator with a pesticide company, as the supply room attendant in a big hotel, and as the janitor at a radio station; but the relationships didn't last, and when they ended I would stop caring about the jobs and ultimately lost them, too. A few years slipped by, and suddenly all of the hippies were returning to school or getting jobs, the so-called revolution was ending — but I was standing still. The next thing I knew, I was on Skid Row, where I learned the answer why so few bums leave the place: it is a ghetto whose barriers to the rest of the city are self-imposed by depression, lassitude, and a sense of failure that make most derelicts feel powerless and motionless, and their role necessitates a fatalistic acceptance of same.

Not me. Once I realized that I had become, almost inadvertently, one of those bums I used to reflect on it with a certain psychosociological bent, I resolved to become the master of my life-style rather than its victim. Call me the Balboa or Columbus of Skid Row bums. On a bright and warm day, my energy and curiosity will take me to the farthest reaches of the city — to the beach to ruminate on the sand; to one of the fancy-arse neighborhoods where the shops and boutiques give me a vicarious lift; to the zoo to watch the beasts and snatch up the remnants of burgers, corn dogs, and the like left in the snack bar; and so on. I enjoy life and am, as you may perceive, thoughtful as well as curious, even somewhat ambitious.

I have always been one of the least unambitious of bums, wanting some things that many of my brethren do not expect or actively seek, such as a permanent room, the pleasure of laundering my modest wardrobe with some regularity, an occasional square meal in lieu of an endless spectrum of jelly doughnuts, leavings, etc. I am not myself a resolute wino like so many bums and spend most of my time sober, although I've shared enough white port bottles with others to account for more blood of the grape than will grace the average wine fancier's palate in a lifetime; in fact, I personally prefer brandy, which I occasionally buy.

My needs, then, within the framework of my lot, are considerable. The usual Skid Row methods of making money — i.e., coin-return slots, panhandling, and selling blood — will not adequately cover them. But enterprise has given me options not available to the average bum. Three or four nights a week, the owner of a neighborhood bar pays me to fill the coolers, sweep up, and clean the rest rooms after hours; every once in a while, I deliver a controversial parcel for one of the Iranians in the of-

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fice above my room; and so on.

It was the need to broaden my income that inspired the idea that has given me a unique and nicely profitable bit of sideline action. You may have noticed that in every metropolitan neighborhood, from downtown to the outer suburbs, there are all sorts of posters on the telephone poles offering rewards for missing pets. They are numerous and omnipresent, and many of the rewards are sizable. At a certain point it became clear to me to heed these posters, since the streets are my natural habitat and vigilance in the interest of profit could be an automatic adjunct to my inveterate pedestrianism; moreover, I *like* animals.

Well, I decided to experiment. I started in one of the neighborhoods where Skid Row yields to an area of white-collar workers. I committed three lost-pet posters to memory and began keeping my eyes open for Problems, a calico terrier mutt; Milly, a mixed-color shorthair kitten, and Heinrich, a German shepherd. After two days of more or less offhanded searching, I turned up the kitten in an alley. It was worth forty bucks, and the radiant expression on the face of the little girl into whose arms I delivered her was an ineffable bonus.

I began to take my idea more seriously, becoming more attentive to my peripheral vision. Within a week or so, I also retrieved a glum-looking beagle named Dunker, whose owner, a terrifically fat man who came to the door wearing a lobster bib, danced with glee when I handed him over, and then crossed my palm with a fifty-dollar bill and pushed a boxed cake into my hands to boot.

And so . . . Two weeks passed, then, during which I roamed the pavement with a small catalog of missing-animal notices (photographs, names, and descriptive text) fixed in my memory. But I found no animals . . . and I was just on the verge of marking off my two scores to wild luck and giving up the scheme when I turned up a real bonanza, a black Manx misnamed Homer who was slumming in an alley behind a butcher shop and delicatessen twenty blocks from his home. I brought him back to a grateful couple who swore they would pamper him with special cuts henceforth, and the husband, who had given the cat to his wife in lieu of the ménage à trois that was her second choice (as he confided to me as I waited for him to fetch his wallet), rewarded me with five twenty-dollar bills.

Well, then. I was convinced that I had the knack — and really, all that was required was patience, a quality generally in short supply these days. Finding a wayward animal is something like looking for arrowheads, or perhaps hunting deer. One must resign one's self to the knowledge that 99 percent of the time will be spent in waiting. That is the single secret of

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making a rare find or discovery. If you have the patience and stick it out, ultimately there will be results. Sooner *or later*. But most people either don't have the time or won't invest it, especially in a society that idealizes brevity — fast food, miniseries, disposabale products. For me, time spent in waiting was in the bag, so to speak, since I was not a person of schedules, appointments, plans, or goals, but rather a temporal errant; thus I could show the patience of an Apache squatting on a mesa and scanning the desert.

And so I attuned myself to a searcher's mentality, by predisposition orienting myself toward cats instead of dogs (although of course I would take whatever I could find), because I like them better than dogs for the simple reason that dogs are more like people, which is really what they want to be, while cats still have a firm grip on their primal legacy.

With the hundred dollars I got from transposing Homer from his alley to the arms of his mistress, I bought myself a secondhand television as well as a print of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which I taped to the wall above my cot as a sort of symbolic balm to my new undertaking. I was upwardly mobile, and it was a satisfying feeling.

Next it occurred to me to infiltrate some of the richer neighborhoods with my vocation, and as I suspected, the amount of the rewards offered were bigger in such areas. I cruised and cruised with my gaze alert, my imagination tantalized by hopes of sensational scores. Now and then a distraught and well-heeled owner will post an offer of two- or three-hundred dollars for the return of their pet. Money is no object when one's better half, love toy, or surrogate child has been lost.

Days passed. A week. Two. I turned up a Dalmatian named Domino for a young man who gave me forty dollars. Another week passed. I fortified my disappointment by reminding myself that only those who have not striven, fail.

Then, one day, I was amazed to discover on a pole in one of the ritzy neighborhoods a notice whose reward sum rang a phantom cash register in my incipiently avaricious brain — FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS!

The notice, which had been posted on scores of poles throughout the neighborhood, was not like any I had come across before. There was a photocopied picture of a badly underexposed photograph of a dog of indeterminate size and breed — although it appeared to me to be a Manchester terrier. The copy read: LOST — "Nexus," terrier with oddments of features. Comes when you call name. Small or slightly bigger size. Wearing tag. 500 DOLLARS GREEN AMERICAN REWARD. 2434 Espina Vista, 563-4543.

500 DOLLARS GREEN AMERICAN

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reward! Ah, Nexus, I thought, let you be the next link in the chain of solvency I am forging with my acumen and enterprise. At this point I think I first entertained the thought of making a different life for myself. I had for so long been immune to any major social aspirations, or even fantasies of such, content with my rude friends and solemn routine — but money, or even the spoor of it, will do remarkable things to a man, and my nose was now open. I began to feel that I had been a social mongrel for too long and it was high time for my debut into respectable company.

That night, on the brink of sleep, I envisioned a procession of currency instead of sheep — bills of all denominations jumping hurdles in my mind. The morning after this apocalyptic vision, I went to the Purple Heart store and bought myself a new pair of used gray and blue Puma running shoes and a stylish Greek fisherman's cap, forswearing the minimalism that had traditionally kept me pinching pennies against the hard circumstances of my existence. I was in the process of bolstering up the confident conviction that there would be more and more money now that the dominoes of my resolve had been set to tumbling.

By this time I had established a standard operating procedure for my endeavors. With my tools of pen and pad and a half pint of Napoleon brandy in my pocket, I would work my way methodically through a neighborhood by the technique of circumnavigating square-block areas. I recorded each new lost-pet notice in the notebook, and every sighting of a stray animal was also noted and checked against the notices. I also took with me on each hunt a half pound of delicatessen pepper loaf that served as bait for the animal that was not approachable without some form of enticement.

In order to locate Nexus, I decided to execute an exhaustive and methodical reconnaissance of his neighborhood, beginning at the point of his disappearance — which is to say, his owner's address. I found myself, at length, then, standing before one of the city's grand old Victorian ladies, a three-story belle dame who appeared still vivid and youthful through the effect of a face-lifting or two and a makeup job that gave her facade an orchidaceous glow, white trim and warm umber curtains in her windows contributing to the illusion. Her steps were white marble swirled with black and bordered by a black iron banister whose balusters were mermaids, nymphs, fauns, and cherubs; and her huge front door was intricately carved of dark orange wood and highlighted by a stained-glass window on which radiant multicolored birds flew in a circular pattern.

The house gave off an emanation of wealth that intoxicated me, firing me with anxiety, and I set out at once to find the creature that would give

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me access to its proud rooms and corridors.

All day I traveled the neighborhood streets with determination, consecutively circumnavigating the four-block grids, stopping now and again to transcribe new notices from poles, watching hawklike for the telltale glimpse of terrier that would signal my prey. I passed a series of people walking poodles of various sizes, and one a borzoi, but paid little heed to the chaperoned beasts, while idly reflecting that one day even they might be the objects of my search, their masters who once passed me so nonchalantly, my grateful benefactors.

As the day passed and a moody lowering sky darkened the city, I became so single-mindedly intent on finding Nexus that I stopped taking notes, deciding that in this case a monopoly of my attention was justified. FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS GREEN AMERICAN!

I must have been at least twenty blocks from Nexus's home when, across the street and in the middle of the next block, a small animal rushed from some unseen place to pause beside the back of an olive-colored Cherokee Jeep whose rear bumper bore a strip reading: SAVE THE SHORT STORY. With my sense of expectation soaring, I took out of my pocket the Nexus poster I had taken from a pole and unfolded it. In spite of the poor photograph, I could tell almost at a glance that the animal beside the Jeep was Nexus. The dance of anthropomorphic currency began anew in my mind.

But . . . some animals are elusive, suspicious, contrary, unfriendly.

I crossed the street in a casual gait and when I saw I was a few yards distance from him called his name with gentle firmness: "Nexus . . . here, Nexus!"

My first good square look at him revealed a subtle but indefinable strangeness that I did not have time to ponder. His ears went up at the sound of his name, and he paused, then looked up at me and braced his forelegs lightly and tentatively in that stance that customarily presages a sudden burst of random runabout running.

"C'mere, boy," I whispered in a tongue that caressed the request; and then, at a crouch, with one hand tentatively extended, I advanced by slow steps. Nexus deepened his own crouch, his eyes friendly but uncertain. With my free hand I transferred a piece of pepper loaf from my pocket to my other hand, and that was the coup de grace. Nexus's tail began to wag metronomically, his eyes brightened, and he leaped at the lunch meat, beginning to gobble it even as I collared him gently and lifted him into my arms, still gobbling, his tail flogging at my thigh.

I caught Nexus's collar tag between two fingers, certified his identity, and responded with a small spon-

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taneous chuckle of joy. I think that in that moment I metamorphosed fully from derelict to capitalist. With so much money I might even open a bank account! The words from an old poem echoed in my mind — Callooh! Callay!

Nexus was comfortable in my arms and not inclined to struggle, which made the task a piece of cake. I had only, I thought, to return him and claim my money. The dark clouds overhead yielded a premonitory spattering of raindrops, but even a deluge would not have dampened my spirits.

As I calmed myself I looked Nexus over, and again the sense of strangeness absorbed me: even holding him in my arms and looking at him, I could not immediately pinpoint what it was, and then I began gradually realize that it was an aggregate strangeness composed of various small factors. I know a bit about dogs from my boyhood camaraderie with them, and this one was *all wrong*. Oddments of feature! His ears, which were terrier ears and should have stood up, drooped suddenly. His nose was distinctly outsized, a black bulwark distorting his face . . . the Danny Thomas of dogs!? His muzzle also seemed slightly elongated, longer than it should have been, and his lips were more extensive than normal, curling under themselves in the manner of a scroll. I saw then when he opened his mouth to lick my hand that his tongue was not pink but a peculiar pastel orange — nor was the color a stain from something he had eaten. His tongue was orange! Moreover, I noted that between his toes his feet were webbed: terriers are diggers, it's what the word means, and their ratlike feet are designed for the task, just as the feet of water dogs are webbed like those of a frog.

There was also an absolutely eerie gelatinous feel to his body. Holding him was like holding an armful of balloons filled with gelatin. I was dismayed, but at the same time I began walking automatically toward Nexus's home. That he was a genetic oddball had apparently not prevented his status as a member of an obviously well-heeled family, nor was it any real concern of mine. He was my prime catch and represented, in graphic terminology, the payment of rent on my room for nearly five months; he was the equivalent of more than 250 burgers at McDonald's, more than a thousand jelly doughnuts, an astronomical number of cups of coffee brewed on my hotplate from 280 cans at supermarket-special prices. He would enable me, I realized with dizzying elation, to buy some of the yearned-for physical love that I had long ago replaced with an autonomous substitute.

It was raining lightly by the time I went up the steps to the door of Nexus's address, and I paused on the landing to comb my hair and feed the dog another piece of pepper loaf for

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being such an even-tempered and easy passenger. I rang the bell and waited, momentarily hearing someone coming. The door was opened by a small man who struck me at once as being professorial in the stereotypical sense: he wore a somewhat natty and outmoded tobacco-colored suit with vest, had a full salt-and-pepper beard of Freudian cut, and the alert, sensitive look of an academician. His striped tie, ironically, was held in place by a gauche clip showing a horse's head from inside an inverted horseshoe.

His eyes, when he saw Nexus, became beacons of joy. His arms opened like those of a mechanical doll, and I proffered the beast into his embrace. He seized the dog with something like a moan of happiness, and exclaimed, "Oh, this baby, *thisss* baby, oh, ho ho ho!" laughing and rocking it in his arms. He went waltzing around then, laughing and humming while I stood and watched with a stupid fixed smile, and after perhaps a full minute of this, he glided to a slow stop, beamed at me as if I had just materialized, and said, "I am so indebted, sir, so much so, am happy, happy to make your 'quaintance," and with that tossed Nexus carelessly the length of the hallway just as if he were an unimportant bundle, and the dog hit the floor with a yelp and streaked off into the interior of the house as his owner took my hand and pumped it vigorously. "Good for you, too," he said, his teeth looming through his beard.

I stared back at the man, startled into immobility. "Drinksir?" he asked. It was the oddest accent imaginable, something like a weird hybrid of Japanese and Slavic, guttural and melodious at the same time.

I nodded at his question, and he held up a forefinger, met my gaze, then pointed down the hallway, gesturing me to follow.

The room we emerged into was a cross between a laboratory and a den. Amid high-backed leather chairs, a matching couch, and walls lined with huge, fusty volumes in leather bindings, there were small stainless-steel tables cluttered with bottles and surgical tools. Here and there hung anatomical charts displaying the physiognomy and visceral structure of cats and dogs, and on the folding wing of one of the tables, in a small pool of blood, lay some apparently freshly excised internal organ, and beside it a pile of bones. The floor under the table was stained darkly with blood.

I hesitated, wondering where I had gotten to, yet even in my dismay was about to mention the reward just as my host turned and held out a handful of currency to me. They were fifty-dollar bills, and I estimated at a glance that there were easily more than ten of them, maybe even fifteen or more. "Give five hundred dollars green American," he said, and I nodded, taking the money, holding it

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in cautious dismay.

"Drink," said my host, and with the dispatch and panache of any Skid Row wino, he passed me a bottle of Kahlúa, with the cap off. With a glance at his smile, I took the bottle — all but automatically from my experience with communal drinking — and took a drink. I relayed the bottle back and wiped my mouth, still looking at the bills in my other hand.

What followed is totally bizarre. The next thing I remember is opening my eyes on a bench at a bus stop a few blocks from the house. The taste of Kahlúa was in my mouth, and my head was inhabited by what seemed the vestiges of a hangover. As I integrated my consciousness, I also found an absolutely spookish memory there: that of being distracted by the sound of a barking dog, but a tiny and diminished barking sound rather than a normal and full-bodied one, and I had an image of looking into the hallway and seeing a dog small enough to fit into my shirt pocket running past the doorway in the hallway like a skittering insect. What a dream! I sat up and reached into my pocket. The pepper loaf was gone, but there was something else there — a wad of fifty-dollar bills that amounted to, amazingly, exactly seven hundred dollars green American.

I took the money back to my room, where I arranged the bills, which were all new and as crisp to the touch as bottle labels before their application, in rows on the army blanket on my cot. It was like a fly's eye view of a Portrait of Ulysses Grant, all those Grants regarding me with solemn contemplation. This was more money than I had seen at one time in a number of years, and it bespoke myriad possibilities for my life. It was just enough money, I knew, to provide the incentive for some kind of new life, and the truth is, I was ready for one: so much time lately spent away from the shabby apartment buildings, dilapidated hotels, and glum or angry people of Skid Row, walking the streets where the houses were antique and well-kept or modern and spotless and the people stylishly dressed and purposeful in their motions, had infected me with a sense of need and heightened ambition. I craved to prosper and take my place among these clean and beautiful dolls in their picturesque world.

The money was a balm, a drug, a goad. I touched the bills individually, held them separately to my nose to inhale the inky bouquet of success. If I had been so long content with my station, I concluded that inertia was the cause — but now I was in motion!

For a long while I sat in the wooden folding chair adjacent to my cot, admiring the money with as much sense of wonder as anyone who has ever contemplated a van Gogh, Matisse, or Rembrandt. I had fancied myself an exile in a bleak place, and now I knew that the exit from it was a

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simple and clear matter.

Finally I put my bills together and inside the pillow, and retired. But sleep evaded me. I was distracted by remembrance of the odd room in the old Victorian, the strange dream of the miniature dog, and the puzzling man — his ludicrous accent and the ease with which he had produced an impressive sum of money, whose denominations he apparently misunderstood.

After a sleepless hour or so, a compelling curiosity, a sense of adventure of the kind that always distinguished me from other bums, and an unfathomable but contrary impulse of perhaps larcenous origin impelled me to rise and walk through the moon-washed streets until I came to the old Victorian. The two top floors were dark, the curtains across the windows on the main floor barely invested with a wan light.

The building stood, unlike most in the city, as a self-contained entity rather than being joined chockablock to those adjacent to it. Its back, therefore, was accessible through spaces on either side. Without pausing for deliberation, I made my way back through a corridor beside the house, more or less expecting to be stopped by a sound of barking, but it didn't happen, and in the back I went up a set of wraparound steps to the first-floor doorway. There I paused, wondering what mad urge had brought me there and what I intended. My fingers curled around the metal bar in my pocket, then withdrew as if it were red-hot. It was for defense, I reminded myself, and I was merely exploring an irresistible mystery. Yet my mind was lured by a conviction that a *force* of some kind had brought me here.

The door was open. Inevitably.

And then I found myself inside the dark kitchen where fugitive moonlight through a nearby window limned the shapes of glasses on shelves and hanging pots and pans and cooking utensils. Obliquely ahead, at the end of the room, a long corridor led to other rooms, among them the one where I had been earlier. I moved stealthily toward the kitchen doorway until I could see a rectangle of dim light cast through the open door of that room onto the hallway floor and could suddenly hear a slight sound of movement from within.

And what now!?

I braced myself . . . but for what? An impulse to quickly retrace my steps and get out seized me, but as I paused and deliberated, it faded.

Then, while I waited in a limbo of uncertainty, a figure emerged from the room to stand in the hallway looking toward the kitchen where I stood furtively with just an angle of my face peering through the doorway. I pulled back, unsure whether I had been seen, and then the man called in a low voice, "One is there."

My heart began to clamor in my

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chest. "You," he called toward the kitchen. My hand gripped the metal bar in my pocket. I could hear him coming slowly forward, and I took a cautious, furtive glance to see if he was armed. He paused in the middle of the hallway, smiling. That sight will be with me always. He was naked and his body was like a surreal caricature of a hermaphrodite, blobby and misshapen, lumpy extrusions distorting the torso, his dual sexual organs a cluttered mélange of drooping phallus and involuted labia.

"Come out," he coaxed.

I stepped into the doorway.

He waggled a finger at me reprovingly, as if I were a miscreant child. "Bad," he said, emotionlessly. "But no matter. We are burning it up. Will tinker again another place."

Abruptly, the naked man began to writhe, and then the entire surface of his body began to agitate with a sort of sizzling white phosphorescence. The transfixed smile receded into the sibilant frying of his flesh, and I watched mutely, wavering in the doorway. I don't think it took more than twenty seconds, although it seemed a timeless spectacle, and when it was over, there was only the most indistinct stain left on the floor, and no smell at all.

Sooner or later I gathered myself together and investigated the house room by room. In the room where he had given me the money, everything was as it had been, except that there were two minuscule stains on the wooden floor, and two stains where the organ and pile of bones had been. In a small cabinet there, I discovered a file of hundreds of photographs of cats and dogs, both living and dead; they had been taken from every conceivable angle and distance and showed the animals in a variety of postures and activities.

In a manila envelope on a book shelf, I found the photographs of myself. Naked and lying on my back, I had been photographed, like the animals, from varied angles and distances.

The rest of the house was elegantly furnished, although the showcase orderliness of the rooms gave no hint that they had been lived in or used. There was no money anywhere. I began to calculate what the furnishings must be worth — there were bronze sculptures, exotic carpets, silver and crystal dishes, ornately framed paintings, expensive lamps, cabinets, chairs, etc. But in the end I wistfully hurried from the house, propelled by an urgency greater than that which had sent me there.

Back in my room a brooding consideration of what had happened kept me from sleeping — yet there were no conclusions to be drawn. It was as if an odd assortment of dream images had superimposed themselves on my life. Finally, I slept.

In the morning it all seemed more dreamlike. Yet I had the money as a

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palpable reminder. Looking at it, however, I felt unmoved by the ambition that had inspired me the day before, indifferent to ideas of status and belongings. All that seemed meaningful was my hunger, so I hurried to the corner store and bought three cans of food for my breakfast — sliced veal in gravy, sliced beef in gravy, and Ranch Supper — then when I was finished I was still hungry, so I caught a fly and ate that, too.

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Richard Kearns writes that he is "a Renaissance man on good days, and 'merely eclectic' on bad ones." The activities he states he will admit to include: author, adman, aerobics instructor, bartender, bookkeeper, critic, past staff writer for Gallery Magazine, *photographer, poet, and a host of others. Presently he teaches at Loyola Marymount University in the Los Angeles area, is at work on a novel and is co-authoring a textbook. "Grave Angels" marks his first appearance in* F & SF. *It is a superbly crafted story of death, and sentiment and sensibility.*

Grave Angels

BY
RICHARD KEARNS

I first met Mr. Beauchamps when he dug Aunt Fannie's grave, the day before she died. I can remember it very clearly.

School was over, the heat of summer had finally settled in, withering the last of spring's magnolia blossoms, and I had just turned ten. Bobby, my older brother, and his friends had gone to the swimming hole down by the Dalton place, but I hadn't gone with them — not because I didn't want to. The last time I'd gone, they'd stolen my clothes. I figured it'd be at least another week before it'd be safe to go with them.

So I'd gone to the Evans Cemetery instead.

There were two cemeteries inside the Evans city limits — one for whites and one for blacks. It's still that way, as a matter of fact. But the white cemetery — the Evans Cemetery proper — had sixteen of the biggest oak trees in all of Long County, growing close enough together so you could move from one tree to the next without having to get down again. I liked to go there, especially on hot days, and climb the trees, read, watch the motorcars hurry in and out of Evans like big black bugs. There was always a breeze in the oaks, and I was sure it never touched the earth.

I used to sit in those branches for hours at a time, like a meadowlark or a squirrel, listening to that breeze. Underneath me, I could feel the trees bend and sway, creaking and rattling and bumping into one another, as if they were all alive and talking among themselves, elbowing each other and laughing sometimes.

I remember it was a Saturday, and I remember I'd brought *Robinson Crusoe* with me to read. I'd read it

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before, but it was a story I enjoyed —I liked pretending that I was entirely alone, free to do whatever I wanted.

I had just gotten comfortable on my branch when I heard someone humming down underneath me, and the sound of wood being tossed into a pile on the ground. Quietly, I closed my book and turned around to spy.

There was an old black man standing with his back to me, maybe thirty feet away from the tree I was in. He was dressed in blue and white striped overalls and a white long-sleeved shirt. On his head was an engineer's cap like the men wore down in the railway yard — It had blue and white stripes in it too. Next to him was a wheelbarrow — old, rust- and dirt-encrusted, its contents spilled on the ground: several two-by-fours of different lengths, painted white; a big tan canvas, all folded up; and digging tools.

He took his cap off, mopped his head with a big red bandanna handkerchief — he was partly bald —put the hat back on, stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket, and studied the graves for a moment, fists on his hips.

Then he sighed, shook his head, and, mumbling and grunting, squatted and scooped up the pieces of lumber in his arms. Their ends flailed the air every which way as he stood again.

He made his way over by Great-Great-Grandpa Evans's grave — the one with the angel sculpted in red granite — where, after deciding on a spot, he spent a couple of minutes meticulously arranging the two-by-fours so they formed a perfect white rectangle against the green grass. He then retrieved the canvas, spread it next to the area he'd staked out, rolled up his sleeves, took out a shovel, and started digging up the sod.

I was fascinated. He worked all morning without a stop, carefully placing shovelfuls of the carmel brown earth on top of the canvas, making sure that as he dug, the sides of the hole were straight, swinging the pickax in big arcs over his head, or chiseling at the sides with it in tiny hammerlike strokes, slow and steady. He hummed to himself, sang songs I'd never heard before, grunted a lot, talked to himself whenever he thought there was a problem keeping the sides straight up and down, chuckling more and more as he got deeper.

He stopped when the sun was overhead and he had dug up to his thighs. I could tell he was hot.

He crawled out, put the pickax and shovel in the wheelbarrow, and then spent a couple of minutes inspecting his work. After that, he walked straight toward the oaks, pulling the wheelbarrow behind him.

I had been pleased with my spying. I had hardly moved all morning, even when I got bored watching him, and watched the cars on Route 85 instead, or the lazy crows circle over-

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head. I hadn't made a sound.

But he walked right to the tree I was hiding in, parked the wheelbarrow, looked up through the leaves like he knew I was there the whole time, cupped his hands over his mouth, and called out: "Timothy Evans, You come down from there right now!"

I was so scared I dropped *Robinson Crusoe.* I watched it fall, sickeningly, right into his wheelbarrow. It took a long time to get there.

I didn't move, hoping he'd go away. He didn't.

"Timothy!"

"What makes you think Timothy Evans is up here?" I yelled back, trying to disguise my voice.

"Well, now, I know who's up there and who ain't, so you get your rear down here, Timothy Evans. No games!"

I slithered down a couple of levels, where we could see each other better, and changed tactics. "Why?"

"It's lunchtime."

"I have mine," I countered, showing him my brown bag.

"Mine's better," he said, pulling a tan wicker basket out from under his wheelbarrow. "Besides, I do believe I'll go home with your book if you don't come and get it."

"How'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Where'd the basket come from?"

He smiled. It was a pleasant smile, and I felt I liked him right away. He set the basket on the grass, took his hat off, and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "If you don't come down, you'll never find out — will you?" With that, he bent over, produced a big red and white checkered tablecloth from the basket, spread it out in the shade under the next tree, sat down, and began to unpack the food.

I could smell the chicken from where I sat. He had potato salad, iced lemonade, and baking powder biscuits with butter and honey. "Promise you won't hurt me if I come down?"

"I ain't promising anything," he said, eating a drumstick, "'cept I'm going to eat all of this if you don't come down here and help me with it."

My stomach growled. Mama had made a peanut butter sandwich for me, with a couple of oranges for snacks. Fried chicken was a lot better. He looked old; I figured I could outrun him if I had to.

I came down in as expert and dignified a manner as possible, not slipping even once. From the bottom branch I dropped my lunch off to the side, swung by my hands briefly, and made a perfect landing by the wheelbarrow. Squatting next to it, I examined its underside, hoping to find the hook or shelf where the picnic basket had been hidden. There was nothing but pieces of rust caught in old cobwebs.

"Lunch is over here, boy," he yelled at me. I peered back at him over

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the top of the wheelbarrow. "You're not going to find anything to eat by looking over there." He laughed and went back to work on his drumstick.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, picked up my sack lunch, and retrieved *Robinson Crusoe* before I walked over to the tablecloth. I stood, book tucked under my arm, and watched him eat for a couple of seconds. "What's your name?" I asked.

He pulled a white paper napkin out of the basket, wiped his lips, chin, and fingers with it, and then looked up at me. "I am Mr. Beauchamps," he said, pronouncing it *bow-shomps,* like a foreigner, "and I am very pleased to meet you, Timothy." He took my hand shook it, as if he were one of Papa's business partners. His hand was huge around mine, and felt warm and dry and crusty with calluses.

"Have a seat," he told me, nodding, while he lifted the hinged basket lid and fished around briefly. "You can't eat standing up." He produced a second blue and white china plate, dumped a second drumstick and three biscuits on it, and slid it over to me.

The chicken was good. So was the lemonade. I broke open one of the biscuits, which was hot, smeared butter all over it with a plastic knife, and dribbled honey on top of that. "How come you call yourself mister?" I asked. "None of the colored men I know call themselves mister. Only whites."

He leaned toward me on one elbow and plopped a pile of potato salad on my plate. "Three reasons," he said, sticking a plastic spoon in the mound and then sitting up. "First, 'cause I am eighty-three years old, and there are only two people in the whole city of Evans that are older than I am. Second, 'cause no one knows my first name, and I'm not telling what it is, so there's nothing I can be called called *but* Mr. Beauchamps. Third," he said, leaning forward again, "'cause I am the gravedigger here. I buried 657 people in my time — white and colored, rich and poor, all of them the same. Ain't no boy does anybody's gravedigging."

"Oh."

He smiled and took a final bite out of his drumstick. "You weren't expected to know that, of course."

"Mr. Beauchamps." I smiled back at him. He was as remarkable up close as he was from a distance. His skin was the blackest I'd ever seen, like baker's chocolate or chicory coffee. His face was leathery and full of wrinkles, and his hands looked like they might have been tree roots. He had white hair, white eyebrows, even one or two white whiskers that curled out on his face from where he missed them shaving, I guess. They were easy to see because his skin was so dark.

I think the thing I remember most about him was his smile. His teeth weren't yellow, like most black folk I knew. They were bright white, and when he smiled, his whole face lit up,

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and all his wrinkles would mesh together and smile too.

"Isn't it kind of scary being a gravedigger?"

"Nope." He looked all around him. "Don't know what could make a day like today scary. The sun's out, shining bright; the grass is green, just like always; and if you're quiet enough, you can hear the birds singing away, two counties over. No boss to stand around and give me a hard time, lots of long lunches — if you take my meaning — my own shovel and pick and wheelbarrow, and new kinds of flowers blooming practically every time I come out here. Can't think of any place I'd rather work."

"But all those dead people—"

"Nonsense, Timothy. We're all going to be dead one day. I'm going to die, you're going to die, your mama and papa are going to die. It's part of life, part of living. The Lord says we can't enter the Kingdom of Heaven 'less we're born again. That's what dying is — being born again in God's Kingdom. We just can't see it so clear from this side."

I looked past him, back to where he'd been working. The old stone angel was standing guard over the spot. "Whose grave you digging now?"

"I ain't saying."

"How come?"

"I just ain't. 'Sides," he said, leaning back and stretching out on the grass, "it's your turn to do the talking now."

"My turn?"

"Sure. Read to me from your book."

So I read to him. I read the part where Robinson Crusoe found Friday — first in a dream, and then when he saved him from being eaten by other cannibals. Friday was the first human companion Robinson Crusoe had after living on the island by himself for years.

> . . . never was a more faithful, loving, sincere servant than Friday was to me; without passions, sullenness, or designs; his very affections were tied to me, like those of a child to its father, and, I dare say, he would have sacrificed his life for my own, upon any occasion whatever.
>
> I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper and useful, and especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke. And he was a very apt scholar, and he was so merry, so diligent, and so pleased when he could understand me, or make me understand him, that it was very pleasant for me to talk to him. And now my life began to be very easy and happy.

Mr. Beauchamps chuckled when I finished reading, scratched his cheek, and said, "Now ain't that something."

"I like it. It's a good book."

"You would think Mr. Crusoe wanted a friend, after being lonely all the time."

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"I think it would be fun to be alone like that."

"I see." He sat up and pawed through the picnic basket once again, but couldn't find anything for dessert, so each of us had an orange from my lunch. They were extra juicy, and we had a contest to see which one of us could spit the pits farther. Mr. Beauchamps won.

"Well," he said, sitting up and patting his stomach, "time for me to get back to work. Seeing as I found you, though, you're going to have to work with me, just like I was Mr. Crusoe."

"You found me!"

"'Course I did. Spying on me from the trees, just like some kind of savage. I could call you Saturday."

"I'm not a savage! My name is Timothy—"

"*All* children are savages! You take my word for it. That's what growing up consists of — civilizing you. You can be Saturday Evans."

"No!"

He chuckled again. "Very well," he said, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders, "I'll be more civilized than Mr. Crusoe was and let you keep your own name. Just so long as you keep me company, if you catch my drift."

"I don't mind that," I said, getting to my feet. "Do I get to watch you dig up close?"

"Of course you do. But we have to clean up here first."

Everything got packed, including my peanut butter sandwich. Then Mr. Beauchamps made the basket disappear by hiding it behind his back. He laughed when I asked him where it went, and told me he didn't know himself, but it hardly mattered until he was hungry again.

I watched him dig the rest of the grave that afternoon. I sat with my feet dangling in it sometimes, or lay on my stomach near the edge of it. The earth smelled rich and damp and somehow clean.

He talked about gravedigging, how it was a craft, how you had to know the earth, whether it was going to be wet enough to stay packed, or if it was going to be mud four feet down, or sand, or tree roots. He said early summer was the best time to dig, and told me how hard it was to dig graves in winter, or in the middle of a storm. But he said he couldn't stop digging graves just on account of the weather.

We sang together, sometimes songs I knew, sometimes songs he taught me. The breeze would brush by us every once in a while, and when we weren't talking or singing, I would just listen to the quiet, or to the sound of Mr. Beauchamps's shovel slicing through the earth.

It was late in the afternoon. Just as Great-Great-Grandpa Evans's angel started to touch the feet of the oaks with her shadow, we finished. The grave was deep — deeper than Mr. Beauchamps was tall.

He handed me the shovel, leaned

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the pickax in one corner of the grave, and climbed up on it like a stepladder. He hauled himself out from there. Then he took the shovel back, neatly hooked the head of the pickax with the back of the shovel's metal blade, and pulled it up.

"I have to go home now, sir."

He tipped his hat and bowed slightly. "Have a good evening then, Saturday."

"That's Timothy."

"Timothy."

"You have a good evening, too, Mr. Beauchamps."

When I got home, I found my empty lunch bag folded up and stuck between the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. I was sure I had put it in the picnic basket when we were cleaning up.

Aunt Fannie died Sunday afternoon.

At least that's when we found her. When we left for church that morning, she was alive.

Aunt Fannie lived with us in one of the upstairs bedrooms, and Mama looked after her, day and night. She was too sick to take care of herself, and had been that way for years.

I was helping Mama carry the dinner tray upstairs. Aunt Fannie always ate before the rest of us did on Sunday, and if I helped, Mama usually let her give me a cookie or a piece of cake from the tray.

I noticed something different right away when we walked into the room, but Mama didn't. She went straight to the windows and opened them, just like she always did, and the wind billowed the white lace curtains like sails.

Aunt Fannie was all propped up on her pillows, and tucked in with a white quilt that had pink roses embroidered on it in every square. Her face was powdered — she always did that; she said she could go through the whole week just plain, but the least she could do was look pretty on the Lord's day — and there was just a little touch of pink on her cheeks.

She held a Bible in one hand loosely. The wind came in the room and lifted the filmy wisp of gray hair that had fallen on her cheek, pushing it back on her head and making it tremble, just for a moment.

She looked like she was asleep. I knew she wasn't. I knew because I couldn't hear her breathing.

Mama tried to wake her up several times. I didn't say anything. Then she told me to get Papa.

We buried her Tuesday morning, in the grave I had watched Mr. Beauchamps dig. The site was littered with wreaths and sprays of bright-petaled flowers, with weeping, long-faced adults dressed in black, most of them carrying Bibles; and with frightened children — Bobby and his friends included — who either clung to their parents singly, or stood together in groups of three or four, try-

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ing to understand what had happened.

I knew they were all seeing an illusion I couldn't see. The flowers, somber clothes, the prayers couldn't hide the clumps of uncut grass, the color and smell of the earth in the grave, the impressions left on the gravesides from the pickax or shovel, the black stone Mr. Beauchamps had tossed up on the canvas after digging around it and cursing for half an hour, the way the wind danced through the oak trees, inviting me to climb them. Or the way Aunt Fannie smiled when she died.

But more than all these things, I wondered how Mr. Beauchamps had known to dig her grave. I tried to spot him all the way through the funeral, even up to the point where it was my turn to throw a handful of dirt on Aunt Fannie's casket. He was nowhere to be seen. The granite angel was the only witness of the weekend's events; she stood silent, reigning over the proceedings, her eyes fixed on a point off on the horizon.

I stopped at the Evans Cemetery every day for two weeks after that, but I still couldn't find him. Where could he be, I wondered. How did he know?

I knew he had to have been there while I was gone: when I went to look for him Wednesday, after the funeral, the flowers were gone, and the canvas; the grave was filled up and the sod put back in place. There was a brand spanking new granite headstone to mark her grave, half as tall as I was. The front of it was polished shiny, and I could see my own faint image in it.

Mama had green eyes, and when she would watch me, I was sure she could see what I was thinking. I wasn't afraid of being watched, exactly — sometimes she would keep at it for weeks at a time, though it never would bring enough trouble to warrant Papa spanking me — but when she got that look and I knew she was watching, I knew I had to be good, or at least be careful.

And she watched me after the funeral.

Now, Mama would never say much to me while she was watching. Nothing out of the ordinary, that is; she would still say things like, "Timothy, sit up straight," or, "Timothy, pick your things up when you're through with them." Sometimes I would get a clue why she was watching me from what she didn't say.

But I never knew all the reasons for all the times she would watch. There would be times, after a bout of watching, when she would make up her mind about what she was thinking, and then tell me about it. But just as often, she would stop as quietly as she started, and never say what I did to bring it on, or why she stopped, or what she saw.

After Aunt Fannie's funeral was

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one of the times she decided to talk. I was in the kitchen at breakfast one morning, when Papa had left for the store but before Bobby was gone.

I knew something was up when I saw her making only one sack lunch instead of two for Bobby and me. I felt all queasy inside when she came over and put it on the table next to Bobby; I hunched over my cereal and pretended I hadn't seen, and that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

"Timothy," she said, and I had to look up at her, "stay put for a while after you finish. I want to talk to you." She smiled at me — a quick, toothless twitch almost, which was supposed to let me know that everything was all right — but it didn't help.

"Yes, ma'am."

She walked back to the counter and began cleaning up, washing the knives, screwing the top on the peanut butter jar, packing up the bread, brushing the crumbs toward the sink. Her window was open, and from where I sat I could see the tops of the sweet peas in her garden out back; but no wind came blowing in the kitchen to flap the yellow checkered curtains, or stir the leaves on the two tiny plants she had growing in the pots on the sill.

Bobby stared at me over his cereal bowl, the spoon briefly frozen in his mouth — he had black curly hair and freckles, and people said he looked just like Papa when Papa was small; I was blond, and Mama had light brown hair, straight as rain when she didn't have it pinned up, so I guess I must have looked like her by default, though people didn't say that — and he applied himself to finishing quickly, not looking at me again until he stuck out his tongue at me as he grabbed his lunch and ran out back. The spring on the screen twanged as the door slammed shut behind him.

Mama came back to the table, took away our empty bowls and spoons, and washed them, untied and hung up her apron on its hook by the refrigerator, poured herself a cup of coffee, and then sat down in Bobby's chair.

"Timothy, you've been spending time down at the graveyard — haven't you?" She said it all casual-like, but her green eyes swung up at me, even though her head was tilted down at her coffee cup.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mama looked down again; carefully grasping her cup by its handle with her right hand, thumb on top, she slowly turned the saucer underneath with her left. "You know what your papa would do if he found out, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

Her lips formed a thin, straight line across the bottom of her face, and she stopped turning the saucer. "Your Aunt Fannie loved *you* very much too." She glanced at me, almost like she was afraid I would say some-

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thing, then took a deep breath and went on. "You know, you were such a colicky baby, and so fussy, your Aunt Fannie was over here quite a bit after you were born. She said she felt like it was her duty, her being your godmother and all."

Mama was silent for a moment. She hesitated briefly, then lifted the cup to her lips and sipped, setting it back with slow, graceful determination, still not looking at me. "Your papa was having hard times at the store, so we couldn't afford hired help like we could with Bobby. Least, that's what he said; I could never tell the difference between the hard times and the good times there, just by going in and looking. I don't suppose that made it any less true, though."

She looked at me now, and smiled her twitchy smile. "There were times I used to wonder if there wasn't anything more to raising babies than feeding you, and washing your dirty diapers, and cleaning you up. And I used to wonder if you were ever going to be anything but hungry, or in pain, or just crabby. That's why your Aunt Fannie was such a godsend." Mama leaned back in her chair. "You used to fuss so, and cry and cry and cry, and there was nothing anybody could do for you until Fannie came over. She knew lots of ways to quiet you, her raising a family that had been and gone already; but your favorite was her music box. She'd bring that little thing with her, and open it up and you'd be just all smiles and wonder. Not that it worked when anybody else played it, mind you. We tried that." Mama chuckled. "You were just too smart for that, I guess."

She sat forward and drank her coffee again. "But you got better, and I got better, and business got better for your Papa, and Fannie got worse. That's the truth of it." Mama started to turn the saucer around again, sighed, and stopped, still holding it, though. "They read your Aunt Fannie's will last week," she said, staring at her hands. "She left money for you and Bobby to go to college, when the time comes. Not that we couldn't have sent you, of course; it'll just be easier now. We should be grateful for that."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, my voice a whisper.

That startled Mama; I don't think she expected me to say anything. She studied me for a second, and then got up and went to her apron, digging her hand in its pocket as she brought it back to the table with her. "She willed me her gold locket," she said, pulling it out and putting it on the table in front of me. It spun when Mama put it down; I could see the delicate rose engraved on the front as it slowed. "Go ahead and open it," Mama said over her shoulder as she hung the apron up again. "Your papa said I could go down to the store and pick a chain for it later in the week."

There were pictures of me and

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Bobby and Papa on the inside. "It's pretty," I said.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Mama answered, sitting down again, this time putting a small wooden box in front of me, and setting three fat brass rollers on end next to it. The box was made of dark walnut, with nicks and dents worn smooth by age and polish; across the lid were inlaid two black stripes with red diamonds. Mama opened it, and delicious music came pouring out. I recognized Brahm's *Lullaby* right away. "Fannie left this for you," Mama said. "Your papa didn't think you should have it until you were older; he said you might break it. You'll be careful, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take it then, and keep it safe," she said. She showed me how to change the brass rollers so I could play four different songs. Their names were engraved on their insides: Beethoven's *Für Elise,* Bach's *Sarabande,* Mozart's *Minute Waltz,* and the lullaby by Brahms. We both listened to the Bach piece play all the way through, the somber minor chords twinkling so you could hear all the notes in a row.

Then it was over.

"Timothy," Mama said as I went upstairs to put the music box away, "I want you to keep away from Evans Cemetery for a while."

I leaned over the banister and looked at her, her figure a dim, hazy silhouette framed against the sunlit kitchen doorway. "Yes, ma'am."

"Just for a while," she said. "You can go back and visit your Aunt Fannie after the summer is over. It's just that there will be other people going to visit her now, and I'd rather they didn't find you there."

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "Maybe you and I can go together and take flowers to her grave sometime. Would you like that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

We never went.

I gave up waiting for Mr. Beauchamps. But I still wasn't getting along too well with Bobby and the rest of the gang, so instead of hanging out at the cemetery, I would spend time over at the old Robinson house. I was safe there; the rest of the kids thought it was haunted.

It sat off by itself, on a hill along the road to Mariana Marsh, and there was a big dead gray tree in front of it with all the bark stripped off. None of the windows had any glass. Someone had tried to board them up a long time ago. But they had since been opened by brave adventurers like myself.

It might have been painted white or yellow once. Most of the paint had peeled or worn off over the years, and the wood underneath was the same color as the tree in front — gray. There were still patches of non-

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descript color that clung tenaciously to the outside, in a futile attempt to defy the elements. The roof over the front porch sagged, and would probably fall off soon. The outside steps were gone.

My favorite spot was up on the second floor, by the bay windows that faced south, toward town and Robinson's Woods. I made it my room. On clear mornings I could see Mama hanging laundry out behind our house, or watch the cars drive into town and park in front of Papa's store.

Every time I was there, I would clean up the new collection of dead branches and litter that had blown in through the open windows. I fixed up an old rocking chair I found in the basement of the house, replacing the tattered upholstery with a burlap bag that said "50 Lbs Net, Parkinson's Cabbage, Produce of U.S.A." I hid Aunt Fannie's music box in the window seat, and I could sit and rock and listen to it play while I looked out at town or over the woods. Or I could just read.

It was Mr. Beauchamps who found me, two months after the funeral, and it was in the Robinson house. There was a light rain outside, and I was in my rocker, listening to the music box play Mozart's waltz, thinking about having to go back to school again in a month and a half. The song ended, and I reached for the music box to start it over again.

"That was real pretty, Timothy."

I turned around and looked, real quick, but I already knew it was him from the voice. He had his own rocker, put together out of a dozen pieces of twisted cane, painted red. He smiled at me, rocking back and forth.

I wasn't going to let him know he scared me. "Hello, Mr. Beauchamps."

"Where did you get that music box?"

"From Aunt Fannie. She willed it to me."

"I see." He stopped rocking, and dug his hand into one of his overall pockets. "Here. Try this."

He tossed something at me, which I caught, examined long enough to realize it was identical to the other brass cylinders that had come with the box, and then fitted it into the machine. It was labeled Chopin's *Nocturne*. I turned the key as far as it would go, and then started it playing.

I could hear Mr. Beauchamps humming softly with the melody. "How did you know Aunt Fannie was going to die?" I asked without looking at him.

He stopped humming. "We're all going to die," he said huskily. "I told you that before."

"But how did you know when?"

He sighed wearily. "I just knew I had to dig the grave — that's all there was to it."

I turned around and looked at him. "Do you know when everybody's going to die?"

He chuckled and relaxed, and his

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rocking chair started to squeak in time with the music. "Not everybody," he said, after listening for several beats. "Strictly speaking, I'm just limited to the people in Evans. They managed to die without anybody knowing before I came, and will probably continue to do so after I'm gone."

"But how did you know to dig their graves?"

"I just knew." He chuckled again. "Take tomorrow, for instance."

"Somebody's going to die tomorrow?"

"Now, I didn't say that. I'm just saying I got a grave to dig over in the Quarters Cemetery. I want you to meet me there and help."

"So somebody's going to die over in Quarters! Who's it going to be?"

"I ain't saying."

"It's old Mammy Walker, isn't it? She's been sick for months."

"Nope."

"Sam DeLuth?"

"Nope."

"Will Atkins?"

"Nope."

I thought for a moment. "Jackson Hardich?"

Mr Beauchamps looked startled for a second, long enough to stop his chair. "I told you — I ain't saying." He fell back to rocking.

"It *is* Jackson — isn't it?" Everybody in Evans knew that Jackson Hardich was going to take on more trouble than he could handle one day. He was always picking fights out in the Quarters after dark, and there were several times recently when Sheriff Tucker had to be called to settle things down.

"Maybe yes and maybe no," Mr. Beauchamps said. "Whoever it is, it don't change the fact that there's a grave that's got to be dug." He leaned forward and squinted at me. "You going to be there tomorrow?"

I looked outside at the rain and then back at Mr. Beauchamps. "I can't come if it's going to be raining."

"Oh, then there's no problem. Tomorrow will be a fine day."

"If it is, I'll be there."

"Good."

There was a hot white flash and a thunderclap that made my chest rumble from being so close, and when my ears stopped ringing, I turned to ask Mr. Beauchamps more about Jackson Hardich, but he was gone, along with his rocking chair. I remember smiling to myself, rocking back and forth vigorously, watching the rain come down harder, listening to the music. It had been fairly easy to trick Mr. Beauchamps into revealing who the grave was for. Now that I knew who the dead man was, I could go see him before he died.

It took all day to dig the grave, the same as before. And it was a Saturday, the same as before. But the Quarters Cemetery wasn't as nice as the Evans Cemetery. The grave markers were

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smaller, most of them made out of wood, many of them cracked and gray and slowly falling over. There were fewer flowers, fewer trees, and the work was harder. I had to help Mr. Beauchamps pull up half a dozen huge stones before we were through; my hands were rubbed raw in spots from it.

It wasn't a bad day, though. We had our lunch together and fed biscuit crumbs to a family of meadowlarks who sang for us later. As a surprise, Mr. Beauchamps brought harmonicas for both of us; once I got through his "brief demonstration of the proper technique for the mouth organ," I was even able to keep up with him on a couple of the songs we had only sung last time. He said I was a quick learner, and taught me to play Chopin's *Nocturne,* just like my music box, though nowhere near as fancy, and with none of the right harmonies.

When we finished the digging, Mr. Beauchamps stood in the cool afternoon shadows that spilled into the bottom of the grave. He smiled. "This is good work, Timothy," he said. "Good, honest work. You should be proud of it." He grunted as he climbed out on his pickax, laboriously settling himself into a sitting position with his feet still dangling in Jackson's grave. "You go home now and eat a good dinner," he said. Then he leaned over and poked at me with his finger. "Take yourself a hot bath too. Hot, mind you." And he tapped his nose. "And you soak in it. We wouldn't want you to be stiff and sore like some old man before your time."

I left him while he was still laughing about that. But I didn't go home. Instead I headed for Potter's Drugstore, on the edge of the Quarters, to spy on Jackson Hardich.

He worked there for Mr. Potter most days, and on Saturdays he and his friends would meet there before taking off for the evening's festivities. Potter's was also the scene of the last two fights Jackson got into.

When I got there, Sheriff Tucker's squad car and an ambulance were there before me, pulled up crooked against the curb, their lights flashing, red and amber spots dancing up and down the outsides of the dingy frame houses huddled together on Sultana Street, the power lines off in the distance winking with an orange glow.

I hid by the gas station garage across the street, behind a pile of old tires. Potter's was closed, but there were lights on in the barbershop next door. A small crowd had begun to gather — mostly older black men, dressed in dark gray suits and hats, standing around the way people did at Aunt Fannie's funeral — when Sheriff Tucker came out of the alley behind Potter's and told everybody to get on home. Right behind him came two ambulance attendants carrying a litter with a white sheet-wrapped body on it. Whoever it was, it was

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plain to see he was dead. But I had to know who.

That was when I became aware I wasn't the only one hiding behind the garage.

I couldn't see his face. All I could tell was he was black, he was watching the attendants put the body into the ambulance, and there was a dark stain spreading high up on his left shirt sleeve, almost by his shoulder.

"You killed him — didn't you?"

"Who's that?" He whirled around, holding a knife in his right hand, his face all shiny with sweat. It was Ronnie Johnson. He couldn't see me.

"You killed Jackson Hardich."

"No!"

"You knifed him."

"No! It ain't true!"

"He made you fight him, and you stabbed him in the middle of it. I know it."

Ronnie began to move toward me, crouched. "You can't say that. You don't know nothing. Who's back there?"

"You're going to die for it too!"

Ronnie stood straight up. "No! He ain't dead!"

"He is!"

"You stop right where you are, boy!" It was Sheriff Tucker. He'd spotted Ronnie from across the street.

Ronnie took off down Sultana Street, running as fast as he could. The sheriff was right behind him.

They found him guilty. I knew that before anyone else did. Mr. Beauchamps dug Ronnie Johnson's grave while the jury was still deliberating.

As I got older, I got better at guessing whose grave we would be digging. And by the time I was in high school, I could get a sense of when Mr. Beauchamps was about to show up as well as who it was we'd have to go gravedigging for. He paid me for my help when I was in high school; he said I was doing my share of a man's work.

Bobby went off to Raleigh for college, and came back with a degree in business and a wife. Her name was Mary Sue Alders — Mary Sue Evans after she married Bobby. They got themselves a house in town, and Bobby started helping Papa with the business, supervising the clerks and keeping the inventory.

I was a loner all through high school, and the kids were happy to leave me to myself. I would watch the people in Evans, waiting; when I felt the time was right, I would go out to the old Robinson house and meet Mr. Beauchamps.

There came a time, though, when I was a senior, a month away from graduating, when he showed up at school to find me. I was out behind the gymnasium, skipping pebbles across the lagoon. He stepped out suddenly from behind one of the willow trees.

"Hello, Timothy."

I looked around to see if any of

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the other kids were in sight. "What are you doing here?"

He walked down to the shore, his big mud-crusted boots making the gravel crunch, stooped, picked up a stone, tossed it at the lagoon, and watched it skim the distance to the far shore. He looked pleased with himself. "Fancy that," he said, "and at my age too." He looked down at me where I was sitting. "I'll need your help tomorrow, Timothy."

I stood up, beat the dust out of my jeans, and then looked him square in the eyes. "Who's it going to be this time?"

He chuckled. "You won't guess it. I can guarantee that."

"Well, then tell me the cemetery."

"Evans. Over by the oak trees."

"Evans. That means it's somebody white." I thought for a moment. "Couldn't be. Old Mrs. Forester is the sickest one of the lot, and even she's doing better, according to Doc Morrison."

"Ain't Mrs. Forester — you're right about that."

"All right. You just wait and see, I'll have it figured out by tomorrow morning when we start."

He took his engineer's hat off and held it over his heart, like the flag was passing by, and sticking out his jaw defiantly, said, "You won't neither, Timothy Evans. I know it."

I stayed awake past midnight, going through the phone book, trying to figure out who it could be. I made lists and tore them all up. I even called the two motels in town, to see if there were any elderly visitors I had somehow not heard about. In the end, I decided to give up graciously, and wait and see who was going to die, just like any other normal person.

The next morning, Mr. Beauchamps knew I hadn't figured it out, but he didn't say anything. He was more cheerful than usual, though.

It was a good gravedigging day: the sky was a clear, bright, cloudless blue; it was warm, but not so warm as to be uncomfortable; there was the tiniest of breezes that played with the grass tops as it came blowing across the cemetery to cool us off. Mr. Beauchamps let me do most of the work. He said if I had it in me, I ought to do it — like singing a song, building a house, or dancing.

I did the best job I could, but that didn't hurry the finish of it. Mr. Beauchamps inspected the entire grave very thoroughly when we were through. He was pleased with it, and paid me twenty dollars extra — my fair share, he said. So I headed home to start the vigil that would let me know who was going to die.

Mary Sue was waiting for me when I got in. She was the only one there. She sat down and told me that Mama and Papa had been in a serious automobile accident, and that Bobby was with them now over at the Long County Hospital. She said it didn't look good for either of them.

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I went numb. I should have known, I told myself. I should have tried to stop them from going out. I should have warned them. I should have prevented it somehow.

I don't remember Mary Sue driving me to the hospital. I don't remember trying to find my parents in the emergency room, I don't remember Doc Morrison trying to calm me down. I don't remember being dragged away by the orderlies to the waiting room. Mary Sue told me about it later.

I do remember the waiting room. It was ugly. The furniture was white wrought iron with cushions, and you could see the shiny metal spots where other people had worn away the paint with worry, waiting.

Bobby and Mary Sue and I had cups of coffee from a machine all night, and we hardly said a word to one another. Bobby must have smoked four packs of cigarettes. Mary Sue sat next to him with her arm around him.

It wasn't fair — knowing that one of them was going to go for sure, and not knowing which. I didn't want to choose which one I'd rather have live, but I couldn't stop myself from choosing, over and over again. When morning came, we found out it was Mama that had survived, although she was paralyzed from the waist down. Papa had died in the operating room.

We buried him Monday morning. Bobby made me go to the funeral. I hadn't wanted to.

We buried a man I realized I never really knew — my father. As we lowered the casket into the grave I had dug, I wondered who he was, how he met my mama, whether he loved her right away when they met or whether it took time to get to know her, whether he was always good at business, whether he had ever sat up all night waiting for someone to die, whether he loved me.

I felt like a stranger to the whole world. I had spent years watching it, waiting for people to fall down like targets in a shooting gallery. And now, here I was, somehow back in it, and all the names and faces I had known were distant, mysterious and cold.

Mary Sue did her best to help. She and Bobby moved back into our house, and we put Mama up in Aunt Fannie's old room. Mary Sue and I took care of Mama — keeping her company more than anything else. We took her on walks. We went with her to the show. We sat with her in the garden, on the porch, in her room. I think she used to hate being crippled. Most of all, I think she missed Papa.

I dug up stacks of photographs Papa had taken and then hidden away in the attic, and Mama and I would spend evenings pasting them into newly bought albums.

Most of them were family picnics and Fourth of July gatherings, the lot of us scattered across the backyard, eating huge chunks of pink water-

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melon, lying on the grass or sitting in lawn chairs with various aunts and uncles and grandparents, before they all died.

I found a picture of myself in diapers, sitting on Grandma Larkins's lap, a blanket draped over my head while I drooled all over myself, white socks barely staying on my feet because they were too big to fit.

And there were pictures of Bobby and me. We had climbed trees together, peered around corners together, taken baths and swum in swimming pools together. There was one where we stood arm in arm, looking doubtfully at two live turkeys Papa had bought for Thanksgiving one year.

But the best pictures were of Mama. She was pretty, in a simple, open-air way. That was how Papa must have seen her. She didn't smile in most of the photographs, but rather appeared to be thoughtful, moody, elusive, quietly untame. One photograph Papa took of her I remember particularly: she was in the kitchen, and she must have just gotten up, because her hair was mussed and she was wearing her robe that had tiny white flowers embroidered in it near the top; she stood next to an old, scarred butcher-block table with a baby bottle on it, holding her hands together, and behind her I could see an old black telephone and a couple of cartons of empty cola bottles on the floor next to the refrigerator. But she looked so regal, so stately, like she owned the world. Her mouth curled in a little smile.

Mama would tell me stories about every single picture as we put it in an album. The only drawback to this was that Papa had always been the photographer and never the subject. I only heard about him. I never saw what he was like. I could see that it was painful for Mama to talk about him, now that he was gone.

I still dug graves for Mr. Beauchamps. But my purpose was different. I waited to know when we would start to dig Mama's grave.

We never talked about the accident, or Papa's death. He never brought the subject up, and neither did I. All we ever talked about was the proper digging of graves, and he remained just as cheerful as he had ever been.

Mama and I were together by ourselves one night. I think she arranged for it to be that way.

"Timothy," she said "you and I have to have a little talk."

"About what?"

"I think it's about time you should be getting to college."

I looked at her. She seemed a tiny woman now, and so old — even compared to the pictures Papa had taken just before their accident. "There's plenty of time for that," I said.

"There isn't!" she snapped, like she always did when she didn't want

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to hear any more about it. She regretted it right away, though. "I think it's wonderful," she said, "your staying here to take care of me and all, and it's meant a lot to me. I can't say it hasn't. But you're nearly a grown man, Timothy. You've got to start living your own life, finding out what it is that you want to do, and doing it. Why, it's not right for you to keep from putting yourself to good use. You've got intelligence. You've got talents. You've got money. With those three things, there's nothing you can't do."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear any buts!" She glared at me for a few seconds, and then looked down at her hands. "Oh, I thought so careful 'bout what I wanted to say, and it isn't coming out right." She started to cry. When I tried to comfort her, she waved me away, and pulled out one of those tiny rose-embroidered old-lady handkerchiefs and dabbed at her eyes with it.

She sniffed. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Mama."

She tried to smile at me, which prompted another, shorter crying spell, only this time she let me hold her hand. Neither one of us said anything for a couple of minutes. Then she pulled her hand away and started fidgeting with her handkerchief.

"I had a dream," she began, not looking at me. "And in that dream, there was an old colored man, dressed in a white tuxedo with a white top hat, who came to me. He said, 'Hello, Mrs. Evans, I've come to take you for a little walk.' I started to tell him I couldn't walk, when I found myself walking already, and since there wasn't much else to say, I didn't say anything.

"He seemed like such a nice man, and he brought me to the edge of a huge plowed field. 'I'll tell you a secret, Mrs. Evans,' he said. 'That isn't a field at all. It's angels' wings.' I wanted to tell him that was a bunch of nonsense, but I looked and saw feathers, growing up out of the ground.

"Oh, Timothy, they were so beautiful! They were all different colors, like they were made out of rainbows, and they grew huge right in front of me, without hardly any time passing at all. So I turned to the man and said, 'Mister, I do believe I'd like to go out there and lie down in those feathers.' And he smiled at me — such a nice smile — and said 'Why, of course you would. That's why we came here.'

"Then he helped me out into the field, and I found a spot I particularly liked, and sat down, and wrapped myself in feathers. They were soft and cozy. It was wonderful."

Mama took my hand and looked at me again. "When I turned around to thank the man, he wasn't there. Neither was anything else. The whole earth had kind of unfolded like, and I found myself riding on the wings of

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the biggest angel I ever imagined, tucked in just like a little baby, safe and sound and warm and secure. She smiled when she saw me looking at her."

Mama let go of my hand and started carefully folding her handkerchief. "That's all I remember."

"That was very pretty, Mama."

"No, it's not! Least, not in the way you're thinking. That dream meant something."

I swallowed because my mouth was dry, and asked her what.

She didn't answer me at first. She just sat there, folding and unfolding her handkerchief. The sound of crickets chirping came in through the open window. "I'm going to die, Son."

"No—"

"I am!" She waited for me to say something else, and when I didn't, she went on. "Maybe tomorrow, maybe years from now. But it's a fact. It's going to happen. And it's not your place to sit beside me while I'm going about it. That's all I'm saying."

"Maybe you're right."

"I'm right."

"Yes, ma'am."

We sat together and listened to the sounds the night was making. After an hour, a chill began to creep into the house, and I bade her good night and went to bed.

Mr. Beauchamps was waiting for me in his red rocker when I got to the Robinson house the next day. "Morning, Timothy," he said. "I'm going to need you tomorrow."

"I know." I pulled the music box out of its hiding place in the window seat and let it play. Mr. Beauchamps started to play along with it on his harmonica.

"It's Mama's grave — isn't it?"

"I never tell who I'm digging for," he said, picking up the melody again when he finished talking.

I let the tune run out. "What if we don't dig it?"

"We have to dig it," he said.

"Well, what if we don't?"

He stopped rocking. "Timothy Evans, I swear to you, I won't never pass up a grave that needs digging."

"Oh."

"You going to be there?"

I looked at him. "Yeah, I'll be there."

"I thought you would." He started rocking again, and played a new song on his harmonica. The notes lingered in the air long after he disappeared.

I met him in the morning, just like always. It was a cold day, and the oaks waved their fire-colored autumn leaves at us, mocking. We still had no problem working up a sweat as we dug, though.

Mr. Beauchamps was more given to humming than to conversation. He hardly said a word to me all day, or I to him. For lunch, we sat huddled over his picnic basket like a couple of

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scavengers; the wind was too brisk to lay out the tablecloth and take our time.

Still, even with a short meal, it was a long day of hard work that sank into tones of gray as the afternoon wore on. The sky was bleak, colorless and unrelieved. The dirt stuck to itself, almost like clay, and it was hard to break up.

We finished. I climbed out first, and Mr. Beauchamps went on his usual inspection tour. Then he walked over to the pickax, stood on it, and started to pull himself out.

I swung the shovel for all I was worth. It sliced into his skull as if it were slicing into a piece of clay, sounding much the same, and then stuck there. I tugged on it — once, twice, and a third time before it came loose, and Mr. Beauchamps tumbled back into the grave. As he lay there, blood pooling around his head in a red halo, he slowly smiled.

I shivered. The chill of the day penetrated me all at once, turning my insides to ice, squeezing all the breath out of me, choking me. I dropped to my knees, then to my hands, and let the shovel slip from my grasp into the open grave.

Slowly, quietly, tiny clods of dirt, on their own, began rolling down the graveside pile of earth. They trickled over the edge of the grave in twos and threes at first, sounding like summer hail as they hit bottom, or bounced off Mr. Beauchamps's body. They gathered numbers and strength and speed rapidly, forming a brown waterfall that covered him, and filled the air with growing thunder, until the heavens roared with it, and the ground shook with it, and I thought I would burst. I pressed my hands to my head and rocked back on my heels, dizzy.

Then there was quiet. Abruptly. I opened my eyes to see the pieces of sod slowly crawl off the canvas, like big green caterpillars, moving back to the spots where they belonged, settling in and weaving their edges together where we had cut them. A cold wind came up, whipping through the trees behind me and cutting through the wings of Great-Great-Grandpa Evans's stone angel, who stood a little ways off, aloof and praying.

I folded up the canvas, collected the two-by-fours, threw them into the wheelbarrow, hid them all in among the oak trees, and left.

Doc Morrison's car was parked outside our house when I got home, a silhouette in the gray shades of evening against our whitewashed front porch. I waited for him to come out and drive away before I went in.

I found Bobby and Mary Sue at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, Bobby's cigarette in the ashtray in front of him sending a long plume of smoke straight up until it curled away two feet over their heads. The fluorescent

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light made their faces pale, and Mary Sue looked like she'd been crying. They both stood up when I walked in, helplessly rooted in place for a moment. Then Mary Sue darted to the stove and poured me a cup of coffee.

"What happened?" I asked, cradling the coffee's warmth in my hands, trying to rid myself of the chill that had followed me inside. I left my jacket on.

Bobby realized he was staring at me; he sat down, reached for his cigarette with one hand, and rested his forehead in the other.

"Your mother had a stroke," Mary Sue said, sitting down again and putting her arm around Bobby's shoulder.

I wanted to shiver — out of hope, out of fear, hardly daring to give into one, lest the other should overcome me. Still holding the cup, I pulled a chair out with my foot and sat down, not bothering to scoot up to the table. "Is she going to be all right?"

Bobby took a final drag on his cigarette, sucked the smoke in deep, and then blew it out in a cloud of frustration. "She's paralyzed," he said. "Doc Morrison says by all rights she should have died."

Nobody spoke for a moment. We didn't look at each other either. "Then she's alive," I said, trying to hide my smile.

"She can't move," Bobby said. "She can't feed herself, she can't sit up, she can't move her arms or her hands, she can't talk. She's alive, all right, if you can call it that." He left the room. Mary Sue and I watched him go, watched the kitchen door swing slowly shut, listened to his footsteps pad down the hall and up the stairs to their bedroom. Mary Sue crushed out his still-burning cigarette.

"The doctor says it's still too early to tell the extent of the damage," she said. "Your mother could get better. She might recover the use of her arms, at least partially. He said she might learn to talk again. He wasn't sure her condition would be permanent. He'll call for a specialist Monday morning. We're supposed to bring her to the hospital then—"

"If she survives, you mean. He's waiting for her to die."

Mary Sue stared at the palms of her hands. "Yes," she said. "That seems to be just about the size of it." She looked up at me. "I'm sorry, Timothy. If you'd been here when the doctor came and heard what he'd said, maybe you'd think differently. As it is, just right now, she might as well stay home. There's nothing they can do for her at the hospital."

"Until Monday?"

"Until Monday."

"Well, she's not going to die," I said, the sweat trickling down under my arms, beading on my forehead.

"You don't know that, Timothy—"

"I do."

"But you can't—"

"I *know,*" I said, staring her full in the face. Her eyes were brown, like

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Bobby's. It was something I had never noticed before. "She won't die." I dropped my gaze and sipped at my coffee. The table seemed miles away.

Mary Sue sighed, sat back, and ran her fingers through her hair. "All right then. You know. More than me, more than your brother, more than the doctor. More than anybody. She won't die." She stood up, and her chair scraped across the floor the way Bobby's did. "I wish I wanted you to be right." With that she left.

I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. Mama was alive! She had made it! She would get better. We would bring her doctors, nurses, medicine — whatever she needed. It was only a matter of time before she got better. That was all. I drained my coffee cup and headed upstairs.

Mama's room was warm, and filled with a pale rosy glow from the nightlight — a frosted white hurricane lamp with pink flowers painted on it. Mama was asleep, so I contented myself with standing next to her bed, jacket draped over one shoulder, and watching her breathe. I had to stand still and observe carefully to do it. But the faint indications were there.

As I moved to leave and close the door behind me, I thought I noticed movement in the shadows on the far side of her bed. I froze. "No," I whispered at the darkness, "I won't do it." I flipped on the light switch, half expecting to see Mr. Beauchamps. But there was nothing. Only Mama's thin, wasted form, captured by the bedsheets and the quilt. Her eyes came open, staring at the ceiling first, then turning her head, slowly, searching for me, finding me. I turned out the light and knelt by her bed, my head close to hers.

"I will not dig your grave, Mama," I told her. "I won't do it."

But she stared at me, her green eyes pleading, unmoving. I took her limp hand in mine. "I won't. We don't know what can happen, Mama. We'll take you to the hospital Monday, and there'll be doctors, and special equipment, and medicine. We'll fix you, Mama. We'll make you better, and you'll talk and write and maybe even walk again. Who knows? But you're not going to die Mama — we've got that on our side."

There wasn't anything else I could say, or any way Mama could answer, so I tucked her in again, and went to bed. I dreamed about her green eyes staring, and about the cold all night.

In the morning I woke to find Mr. Beauchamps's pickax and shovel in my room, propped against the wall next to my bed. They were wet with dew. I wiped them off with my bed sheets, so they wouldn't rust, and put them away in the garage.

Long County Hospital did what it could for Mama, reluctantly. For the two months she was there, I visited her during the days, sometimes with

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Bobby, sometimes with Mary Sue, most often by myself.

I would read to her — newspapers, poetry I knew she liked, Bible passages. We'd prop her up so she could see what I was reading, and follow along with me. She wouldn't, though. On good days, her green eyes would watch me wherever I went in the room; on bad days, she would just stare at nothing.

It was the same routine after we brought her home, once Doc Morrison and the hospital made it clear there was nothing that could be done for Mama, even if they had wanted to. We put her back in Aunt Fannie's room, hired a live-in nurse, bought a whirlpool bath, rented all sorts of fancy monitoring equipment — anything the experts asked for. Christmas came and went.

And the dance with Mr. Beauchamps's digging tools began to be an odd diversion, a game that wouldn't stop.

I was frightened of them at first, not sure if something worse was waiting to happen. No matter where I hid them, they would show up in my room mornings, always in the same spot, damp, but no dirt, no rust.

The novelty of it took over after the fear wore off. It was like having my own rabbit in a hat. I would hide them further and further away, or make it harder, to see if the trick would still work. I started in the garage at first; locked, chained, bolted, encased in cement out back. From there I went to the graveyards. And the Robinson house. The marsh. Long City, when I had the excuse to go.

I nearly got in trouble when I left them at the store — Bo Potter bought the pickax, and it vanished from his shed during the night. Bobby replaced it without saying anything, and I couldn't figure why. I couldn't ask, either. That was another game: discovery, hoping and fearing Mary Sue, Bobby, or Althea — Mama's nurse, Mammy Walker's girl who trained for medicine instead of midwifing, like Mammy — would find out. I tried to imagine what they would do if they knew.

Once the specialists started coming to our house to see Mama, after the first of the year, I let the pickax and shovel stay in my room on hooks. The playing got weary, tedious, losing its edge with each new prospect for Mama's recovery.

They all seemed cut from the same mold, the specialists — gray-suited, bald, bespectacled; embarrassed smiles on all their faces. They came to us from New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, more out of curiosity to see Mama like she was some kind of freak than because they thought she could be helped. They examined her, consulted, and we waited. She didn't get any better.

I kept reading to her anyway. I didn't feel like it was as much a matter of hope as it was a matter of time.

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Bobby and Mary Sue adjusted rather quickly to Mama being home. They would help me with the reading, and Mary Sue and Althea worked as a team to take care of Mama — giving her baths, preparing her food, keeping records. Bobby took me with him to the store to teach me the business, which was fine as far as I was concerned; I was through with gravedigging, and willing to help out running things.

The situation lasted until February, when Bobby said he was tired of all the gloom and doom hanging over our heads, and he and Mary Sue started going out on the weekends. I stayed home with Mama.

Which was why Mary Sue asked me to help with a surprise birthday party for Bobby — she said she thought it would do us all some good to have regular people over at the house. I was hesitant at first, but she kept at it until I agreed to help.

My part in the plan was to take Bobby over to the county seat — to file some tax papers, ostensibly — and stall him while we were there. We weren't supposed to get home until eight o'clock. I called over to Jameson's Garage in Long City ahead of time and let them know what was going on, so when the car wouldn't start from the distributor cap being jimmied, they wouldn't give me away. They timed it just right, holding back from fixing the car until seven-thirty. None of them could tell me how the shovel and the pickax got in the back seat; they acted like it was somebody else's joke.

I raced home. After the first five minutes at eighty miles an hour, Bobby stopped asking me why. He just buckled the seat belts and wedged himself in the corner against the door and the seat, one arm over the top of the front seat, the other braced against the dash.

We first heard the sirens when we passed the Evans city limits. I screeched the car to a stop outside the circle of fire trucks, and it was plain to see the firemen were fighting a losing battle against the burning house. Our burning house.

Bobby tried to run inside, but that wasn't what held my attention. Rather, it was the bank of ambulances parked along the drive, one or two of them pulling away as we pulled up. There were burnt and charred bodies being loaded up and down the line, and moans filling the air above the roar of the fire and spitting of the hoses. I began opening the back doors of the ambulances nearest me, reeling in the sweet stench of cooked flesh that boiled out every time. They were all alive.

I found her in the fifth car. Mama had been burned beyond recognition, except for a single, lidless green eye that turned toward me.

I slammed the door shut, screaming, stumbling away. A pair of atten-

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dants carrying a squirming body on a litter ran past me. The world began to spin, and I could feel the heat from the fire reach for me, even as I heard the sound of the explosion.

I knew what I had to do. I grabbed the pickax and the shovel and ran for Evans Cemetery, as fast as I could, the moon lighting my way as I rushed across the open fields, trying to leave behind me the sounds of the fire, the smell of burning people.

I found the wheelbarrow where I left it, rolled it to the first spot, measured out a rectangle with my two-by-fours, and started digging. I wept until I couldn't see through my swollen eyelids, cursed and screamed until I was hoarse, swung the pickax at the defenseless earth with a vengeance until I was barely able to lift it, and the moon glared down at me like Mama's eye, lighting everything I did. When I finished the grave, I sat for a minute at the bottom, panting.

It was still night.

I picked up my boards and laid out the dimensions of the next grave. It went so much slower than the first, and now I began to regret killing Mr. Beauchamps, not out of guilt, but because I could have used his help.

The digging became painful; even in the moonlight I could see the bruises and cuts on my hands. My feet hurt. My back ached from the strain. I thought of Mr. Beauchamps digging graves even after he reached ninety, going slow and steady, and that gave me hope to go on.

I finally finished the second grave. I was barely able to crawl out. As I lay there, exhausted, I suddenly realized I had been listening to music.

It took me a minute to recognize the tune: Chopin's *Nocturne,* played on the silvery, tinkling tones of Aunt Fannie's music box.

And then I realized it was still night, and I was still looking at a scene illuminated by moonlight. I rolled over.

He was sitting on the shoulder of the old stone angel, dressed in a white tuxedo instead of his blue and white striped overalls, and his engineer's hat was replaced by a white silk top hat. "Hello, Timothy," he said. The music box sat in his lap, its lid open.

"Hello, Mr. Beauchamps," I croaked back.

"Save your strength," he said, pushing off from his perch and slowly floating to the ground. "You've got a lot of work ahead of you tonight."

"The moon—"

"Never you mind about the moon! I'm doing my part, and you do yours—there are lots of graves to dig before morning gets here. You can rest a little before you get started on the next one, though."

So I rested to Chopin. And dug to Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. Grave after grave, until the pain, the remorse, the revulsion drained away; and there was nothing left but the

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sound of the shovel, the shadows dancing with the moonlight that poured down from the sky, the crisp, brittle notes of the music box, and the gentle encouragement of Mr. Beauchamps. The sun came up as I finished digging the twenty-seventh grave.

There is no one left to get close to anymore. Except for Mr. Beauchamps. In addition to bringing me lunch when I'm working, he always comes by on special occasions — the anniversary of our meeting, my birthday, his birthday, the day I passed his gravedigging total of 743 — and that was well over a decade ago.

I am ninety-six years old now, and have buried 915 people — my brother, my sister-in-law, my cousin, my nieces and nephews, the sheriff, the doctor, the black folk who lived down in the Quarters, the white folk who used to work for the Evans family business; people I never knew, or met, or even heard of. As I dug every one of their graves, I wondered who they all were, where they came from, and I was glad to give them their deaths, to help them step into the next Kingdom. But I am tired. I have been tired since the night I dug twenty-seven graves.

When there's a nice day and I don't have to go digging, I put flowers on Mama's grave, or on Mr. Beauchamps's. He was the first black man ever to be buried in Evans Cemetery, even if no one else knows about it.

And I keep hoping the next grave I dig will be my own.

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What is real? In "Visionary Shapes," Robert F. Young ("Three-Mile Syndrome," August 1985) poses this question and finds, as was once said, that "A handful of sand is an anthology of the universe."

Visionary Shapes

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Hawkins hit the spacewarp (he assumed, at least, that this was what happened) just as he sighted the Kus fleet, and a moment later his scoutship landed of its own accord on the sandy surface of a strange world lighted by a sun like Sol.

It entered his mind that the warp, if warp it was, might be a weapon of the enemy. But he threw the thought out. Despite their advanced technology, the Kus could not possibly bend space.

He had been headed toward Mars, around which the Kus fleet, pausing in its Earthward course, had gone into orbit. The ships comprising the fleet were equipped with image-shields that made them immune to radar and that lent them invisibility, except at close range, even when telescopes were used. Months ago a supply ship headed for the Barnard Star's II colony had passed close to the ships when they were entering the Solar System and had sent back vague photos. Special unmanned craft had monitored the fleet's course afterward. Hawkins's scoutship was the first manned craft the Terran Navy had employed. His mission was to alert the Terran flagship the moment the Kus ships resumed their Earthward course.

He tried to turn on the scoutship's lift-off engine so he could return to space. Once there, he might be able to locate the warp and pass back through it. The lift-off lever broke off in his hand.

Staring at it, he saw that it was no longer made of steel but of plastic. Or, if not plastic, a substance that so closely resembled it, it could be called nothing else.

Next, ignoring the possibility that

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he might now be light-years from the Solar System, he tried to radio the Terran flagship — only to find that the transmitter had turned into a plastic imitation of itself.

He saw then that the control board had undergone an identical metamorphosis.

He tapped the board. It gave forth a dull, hollow sound.

He tapped the bulkheads and stamped on the deck, obtaining similar sounds.

Was he to believe, then, that the entire ship had turned into plastic?

He stared at the viewscreen. It had turned into a window. He saw sand, sand, sand.

Hawkins was a sensible man. He knew there had to be a logical explanation for what had happened.

He had Addison's disease, and a navy medman had recently given him a new drug. All drugs had side effects, and there was no reason to think that this one was an exception to the rule. Perhaps he was hallucinating.

The thought that he might be filled him with relief. Far better to be hallucinating that he had gone through a spacewarp and that his ship had turned into plastic than for both incidents to have really occurred. Any moment now the delusion might fade and he would find himself back in space on board a bona fide ship.

He waited for the moment to come. It did not.

But perhaps it would. While he was waiting he would take a closer look at the strange world he seemed to have landed upon.

He stepped into the lock, closing the inner door behind him. He reached for his space suit. It seemed to be real. But he did not put it on because he noticed then that the outer door was ajar and realized his lungs were already full of alien air.

There was no difference, insofar as he could tell, between it and the air he had been breathing before.

He pushed the outer door the rest of the way open and climbed down the boarding ladder to the ground. The planet had Earth g, but he had known this in the back of his mind ever since he landed.

Sunlight reflecting from the sand hurt his eyes, but they quickly adjusted themselves to the glare. He saw that the ship had come down in a large, sandy basin. Nothing grew there. He doubted that anything ever had.

There was no evidence of intelligent life. But this did not mean there was none. Instinctively he felt for his cation pistol, which he carried in a holster on his right hip. The feel of it reassured him, and then he thought, Maybe it turned into plastic, too! But he saw that it had not when he took it out and examined it.

He climbed the nearest slope, his feet sinking into the sand. His lack of a shadow told him the sun was directly overhead. Its rays were warm, but

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not uncomfortably so.

Reaching the top of the slope, he saw another basin, similar to the one he had climbed out of. And in the far, far distance, he made out a small mountain. It had an odd shape. Its peak had sheer slopes and rose abruptly from the broader base of the lower slopes, which were also sheer. At this point he became aware of a wind. It brought to mind a distant bellows and came from the direction of the mountain.

Far to his left a body of water glittered in the sunlight, and far to his right he discerned the upper face of an escarpment.

It was futile to try to identify the planet (assuming that it really existed), because even if he was still in the same universe, he might be on the opposite side of the Galaxy from Earth.

He had only glimpsed the landscape when the scoutship came down, and while it was true he had seen nothing but sand (had failed, even, to spot the body of water he had just described), he knew there must be vegetation growing somewhere; otherwise there would be no air.

He descended the slope into the second basin, crossed it, and ascended the opposite slope. Walking was laborious, for his feet kept sinking into the sand. He feared that when he reached the top of the slope he would see another basin. Instead, he found himself gazing down upon a small sandy plain. And resting upon it in a wide circle as though they were still in space, their bizarre design betraying their alienness, were the ships of the Kus fleet.

Hawkins dropped down flat and inched back down the slope till he was out of sight. Then, lying on his stomach, he raised his head high enough to enable him to see the ships. There were twelve of them, and despite their immobility and despite their nearness to each other, they lent the impression that they were orbiting a planet.

Either they had come through the same warp he had, or one just like it.

Assuming, always assuming, Hawkins reminded himself, that I am seeing what I think I see and am not hallucinating.

He wondered if he had been spotted. There was no activity around the alien ships, but this did not mean there was none within them. The flagship was less than half a kilometer from where he lay. The bubble covering its observation deck scintillated in the sunlight. The Kus could easily have seen him when he crested the slope.

Any moment now one of the hull guns might be trained in his direction.

He fixed his eyes on them, ready to roll back down the slope if one of them moved. He knew he was being naive, that a race of beings capable of building interstellar ships certainly

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would have projectiles that could blow both him and the ridge away. Yet he lay there feeling no fear.

At length he realized why. The sunlight, while it scintillated on the observation deck bubble, gleamed but dully on the ship's hull, and in the back of his mind he had known at first glance that the Kus ships had undergone the same metamorphosis his scoutship had.

He had nothing to fear from plastic guns.

Lying there, he began to wonder if the Terran fleet had passed through a spacewarp, too, and had also undergone a metamorphosis. Logic said no, that the presence of his own ship and the Kus fleet was preposterous enough. But did logic really apply?

He had not glimpsed the Terran fleet during his swift descent, but he had not glimpsed the Kus fleet, either.

Given the original positions of both fleets in space and the original position of his scoutship, the Terran fleet, if it had passed through a warp, should lie in the direction opposite to the one he had taken when he left his scoutship. And since distance had shrunk, the fleet might be within walking distance.

He would find out.

He was both hungry and thirsty when he reached his ship, and he climbed up into it and stepped into its tiny galley. He was only mildly surprised to find that the food had turned into plastic and that the water had disappeared. Nevertheless, for the first time since his arrival, he knew fear. And try as he would to convince himself that he was the victim of a drug-induced hallucination, the fear would not go away.

He was not a man who frightened easily. He had enlisted in the Terran Space Navy on a dare and had risen to the rank of lieutenant commander. Before he became afflicted with Addison's disease, he had been cited twice for bravery in action.

Before joining the navy he had been a moon pilot, ferrying passengers to and from the moon. He had had a mistress on the moon and one on Earth. Probably if he had not already been in the navy when the Barnard's Star spacecraft sent back photos of the approaching Kus fleet, he would have enlisted without the provocation of a dare. For patriotism had been reborn — only it applied not to any individual race, but to the Earth-race as a whole.

Wishful thinking that the alien visitors might be benign vanished when radio messages arrived on Earth, in which the Kus, employing a language translator, stated their identity and commanded the peoples of Earth to surrender or face annihilation.

At once the nations of Earth began building weapons that the builders hoped would outmatch those of the enemy. But no one believed the forthcoming battle would be easily

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won, for although it was unlikely the guns with which the Kus ships were equipped would be superior to the new nuclear cannon being installed on the Terran ships, the Kus, like the legendary cowboy who carried his pistols in plain sight upon his hips, might have a derringer up their sleeve.

Hawkins found the Terran fleet on a small plain about three kilometers beyond the basin in which his scoutship stood.

The fleet had been in orbit around Earth; now it was positioned in the same way the Kus fleet was. There were fourteen ships, and, like the Kus ships, the Terran ships lent the impression they were still in orbit.

The sun, slightly past meridian, beat down upon plastic hulls and plastic guns. The bubble covering the flagship's observation deck was similar to the one covering the observation deck of the Kus fleet's flagship and scintillated no less brightly in the sunlight.

Apparently no one had disembarked, for he saw no sign of life. But surely someone on the observation deck must have spotted him by this time. He pounded down the slope, waving his arms. He had no fear of being mistaken for a Kus, for an X-ray camera on board one of the unmanned spacecraft had revealed that the Kus were crocodilian.

When he reached the flagship, he saw that its lock was open, and he was certain then that he had been seen. Climbing the boarding ladder, he stepped into the lock. He frowned then, for the inner door was closed. He pushed it open and stepped into a corridor. Puzzled that no one had as yet accosted him, he proceeded along the corridor to the companionway that led to the observation deck and he ascended the steps.

Several of the ship's officers were standing on the deck. They appeared to be in conversation, although nothing was being said. One of them was the admiral. Hawkins hurried over to him and stood at attention before him. He did not seem to be aware of Hawkins's presence. Neither did any of the other officers.

"Sir," Hawkins said, "my ship was drawn through a warp, too. And it, too, turned into plastic. The same thing happened to the Kus fleet. Sir, what can be the cause of all this?"

The admiral did not bat an eye. Hawkins had never met him, but he had seen him from afar. He was a tall, cold man, a veteran of two wars. A ladder of multicolored ribbons adorned his chest. His sky-blue uniform was spotless. The creases of his trousers were as sharp as razor blades. His face was at once Slavic and Waspish — stolid yet stern. His eyes were china blue.

Hawkins touched his chest, gave a slight push. The admiral fell upon his back. His arms and legs retained the same position they had held when he was standing up.

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Hawkins pushed all the other officers over.

He knew that if he went through the rest of the ship, he would find that the other members of the crew had also turned into life-size dolls. That he would find identical complements if he explored the other Terran ships.

And he knew that if he explored the Kus ships, he would find complements of crocodilian life-size dolls.

Why hadn't *be* turned into a doll?

But that wasn't the right question. The right question was why anyone had. And why two spacefleets and a scoutship had turned into Brobdingnagian toys.

Hawkins left the flagship and set out for the distant escarpment. From its eminence he should be able to obtain a better view of his new milieu.

With each step he took, he prayed that if what he was experiencing was a drug-induced delusion, it would go away.

He crossed basins, climbed ridges, circled dunelike hills. As he neared the escarpment, he headed for a point where the sand had drifted almost to its crest. He started up the long slope. He now had a slight shadow to keep him company.

As he grew closer to the escarpment, he saw how smooth its face was. And when, after completing his climb, he touched the surface, he knew he was touching wood. He was astonished — the more so when, glancing to his left and then to his right, he saw that the face was plumb.

He was high enough now to reach the escarpment's edge. He got a good grip on it and scrambled to the top. Rising to his feet, he found himself standing on a flat wooden surface about three meters wide. He looked back the way he had come, saw a waste of sand, and in the far, far distance a straight rim that looked like the upper part of another escarpment. He made out the two spacefleets and the dark dot of his scoutship, and saw the body of water he had noticed earlier. It appeared to be a small lake.

He looked in the opposite direction. The wooden wall — for that was what it was — dropped dizzily down to a vast green plain. He saw trees in the distance — trees whose height exceeded that of the wall — and beyond them he made out a structure at least six kilometers wide and at least three kilometers high.

He felt a wind. It was little more than a breeze, and discrete from the bellowslike wind that came from the direction of the mountain. He smelled green grass and meadow flowers.

Far to his left, in the direction of the mountain, he made out a slope that led down from the wall to the plain. I've come this far, he thought, so why not go farther? Certainly there was no point in returning to his ship. He would descend the slope and walk

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across the plain to the distant structure. Intelligent beings of some kind must be living in it. If they did not prove to be hostile, perhaps he could find out from them where he was.

He began walking along the top of the wall toward the slope. As he grew closer, he saw that it had been created by a huge pile of objects that had collapsed against the side of the wall. For a while he could not make out what any of the objects were, and as he walked he toyed with the idea of gaining the plain by leaping from one to another on his way down. But the notion died in his mind when he got close enough to identify some of the topmost ones, and he froze to a halt as the ramifications of what lay before him turned the red corpuscles of his blood into particles of ice.

A plastic Genghis Khan sat astride a plastic horse, even though the horse lay on its side. A plastic Teddy Roosevelt sat astride another plastic horse, and both he and the horse were upside down. A plastic MiG-15 lay between the two stalwart warriors.

A plastic Cleopatra and a plastic Antony were clasped in hot embrace between a plastic William Jennings Bryan and a plastic Cadillac. The stern of an oil tanker protruded grotesquely from the middle of the enormous pile.

He saw a plastic Amerind carrying a plastic tomahawk. The life-size doll lay on its side. He saw a plastic pope. Farther down the surface of the pile, he saw a plastic Sumerian with one leg broken off.

People and things, things and people. All made of the same sad substance as his ship, all thrown away as though whoever had been playing with them had grown bored.

Representative pieces of the whole.

He raised his eyes to the mountain. He had thought he saw it move. The bellowslike wind had grown louder.

Yes, the mountain *had* moved. And it had grown higher. He saw that there were little trees growing on its crest. It began moving toward him on columnlike legs. The lower slopes had separated from the mountain proper and become massive arms.

Lines from the *Rubâiyat* ran through his mind:

We are no other than a moving row
Of visionary Shapes that come and go
Round with this Sun-illumined Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show.

In the beginning, he thought, there had been a game called *Sumer*. Gradually it had grown into a game called *Earth*.

Now it had become a game called *Space*.

He was running now. Back along the top of the wall. Back down the

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sand drift into the box.

As he ran, a question repeated itself again and again in his mind: How had he broken the bonds and escaped from the Grand Illusion?

The fact that he was a representative piece meant nothing. In common with the other members of the human race, he was a visionary shape.

He should still be in his ship, in space.

Thunder. The mountain's footsteps. A dark cloud. The mountain's arm.

He ran through the shadow of the cloud. In the direction of his ship. Why? he asked himself. Why am I running toward my ship? It's only a plastic toy. It can't lift me from the ground.

But he knew the answer. His ship was the only place he had to go.

A smaller cloud. Descending from the sky. The mountain's hand. You are a godchild playing a new game. You used to sail your ships on a mud puddle you thought of as the Seven Seas. Now you sail them in space. Bored with the game, you doze off, and while you are sleeping one of your pieces comes to life. What do you do?

Hawkins knew what he would do. He would pick up the piece and take it apart to find out what made it tick. Or perhaps, in a fit of anger, swat

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it like a fly.

He could not see the monstrous hand, but he knew it was close above him. He pounded the last few meters to his ship. He climbed the boarding ladder and dived into the lock and closed the door. The door gave forth a dull, metallic sound as it sealed itself; simultaneously the ship shimmered. He opened the inner door and stepped into the control room. Looking into the viewscreen, he saw not sand but space.

Hawkins took the small container of pills the medman had given him and threw it into the disposal. He had radioed the Terran flagship that the Kus fleet had resumed its Earthward course and now he was on his way back home.

He had put in a bad half hour, but at length everything had straightened itself out in his mind.

Human history was not a succession of cruel and childish games.

There was no such world as a planet of the gods.

The only warp he had been through was a warp in his own mind.

Tiredness touched him, and he put the ship on automatic and headed for his bunk. Before he strapped himself onto it, he took off his shoes. When he did so he saw that they were partly filled with sand.

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This is the first of two superior stories we have from a writer who is new to fiction but who has other connections with SF. Mr. Wagar is a history professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He has published two books related to SF: H. G. WELLS AND THE WORLD STATE (Yale University Press, 1961) and TERMINAL VISIONS: THE LITERATURE OF LAST THINGS (Indiana University Press, 1982).

The Day of No-Judgment

BY
W. WARREN WAGAR

I saw Ken Weibley today in my office. On an impulse I told him everything. When he used to chair the math department, before he retired, I could always count on his advice and support.

Practically the only time Ken didn't support me, I was wrong. We really did need to hire more adjuncts to teach the freshman courses, but I told him my cupboard was bare, which was a lie, and he went over my head to the Veep.

Anyway, he hasn't noticed a thing. No clocks running too fast, then too slow. No barking cats or mailmen in tuxedos or words out of place in classic texts. No Sylvias.

Sylvia never wears makeup. One day she came to work with paint all over her face. At noon it was gone.

"Did you wear makeup this morning?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Walker, I just don't think it becomes me. Some people were created for soap and water and nothing else."

But she had worn makeup for a few hours. Lipstick, rouge, mascara, the works. Not heavy, yet obvious.

That was, when, last week? I mentioned it to Ken, and he made a wise little joke about absent-eyed professors.

It's hard to remember when the first incident occurred, or what it was. Perhaps memory is also affected, which would be worse than anything. That's why I must keep a journal and keep it faithfully.

It could be memory playing tricks with the passage from Shakespeare. "Why, then the world's mine oyster,/ Which I with blade will open." I write the lines, I see them in my Bartlett's, but they're wrong. It's "sword,"

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not "blade." When did it change? But it couldn't change. Not one word in all the millions could ever rise up from the page and walk away. I have to assume that my memory has let me down. I don't really believe it.

Then what about the task force on the core curriculum? I appointed ten people. One of them was Nora Fishbein, although her name appears nowhere in the minutes, and every memo shows her place taken by Selma Fleischer. The names overlap a little bit, but not much. In any case, why would I have chosen a second psychologist and nobody from art history? In any case, I didn't. I appointed Nora and I cannot find a scrap of paper anywhere in any file to prove it.

The queerest thing is Julia Honeycutt. A student who begs to get into your seminar and then misses the first meeting and treats you with a kind of sullen contempt when she does come.

I cannot figure out what she wants from me. I do not find her particularly attractive. She obviously thinks I am a joke, to judge from her obiter dicta on my clothes and hairstyle.

The time to get out of teaching and into full-time administration is when you can't expel a hostile student from your skin no matter how hard you try. But we have this odious tradition of the teaching dean, deans who do their turn in the trenches. Keeps us humble. Keeps us in touch. Theoretically.

Would there have been a Julia, before? Before this started? Has anything really started? All I know is that I keep seeing her sour little face with the Habsburg lower lip and the mocking blue eyes, in my sleep, in my books, in my thoughts, daring me, to do — what?

I was at the mall, to buy the *Ring* on CDs. For years I have had my old Karajan LPs, my nineteen trustworthy Karajans, with Crespin and the rest, and finally I made the plunge. The set was in, just as I ordered it. But they charged me only $4.98 per CD. The whole *Ring* for less than $75.00. I showed the clerk the price list, pointed out comparable CDs elsewhere in the store, but no, the *Ring* goes for $4.98 a disc. It's nonsense.

I bought my discs at ten o'clock, and when I got to my office it was still ten.

"You're just too efficient, Mr. Walker," said Sylvia. "You do everything in the least possible amount of time, which is why you are where you are."

"But I know it was ten when I left the mall," I sputtered.

"Well, it's nearly five past now."

I stared at her, looking for traces of makeup.

"Do you know anything about the price of compact discs?"

She didn't.

I gave up.

At any rate, the effect is continu-

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ing. Small details that are inconsistent and impossible.

In the afternoon I met my seminar. For the first thirty minutes, I felt in good control of the material, and the students started to join in without prodding.

We had just reached the point of discussing topics for everybody's second paper when Julia strolled in, taking the one unclaimed chair around the table. On the right hand of God the Father, of course. I could almost feel her breath on my cheek. She was wearing a bulky knit blouse that did not conceal her breasts. They are, well, enormous. At least I think so. When she moves, they sway to and fro slowly like whales rolling in a dark sea.

None of this helped the seminar. For a while she kept asking me to define words I used, challenging me with her eyes, which are a brilliant light blue. Perhaps she wears tinted contact lenses.

But then she grew quiet, slumping back in her chair. She yawned, fidgeted, tapped her fingers in her palm. Like a bit player who upstages the leading man during his big soliloquy. Her impatience and boredom were contagious. Other students began to fidget, too, and finally I had to say, O.K., that's enough, let's meet again next week, bring in ideas for your papers, read the two assigned chapters, we'll talk about them, O.K., have a good week — and she sat there with the smallest suggestion of a smirk on her lips, as if she had won another round in our pointless game.

"Can I see you sometime about my paper?" she asked.

I avoided her eyes. "Well, as I said, we'll discuss the topics at our next meeting."

"No, I mean the first paper. I don't understand some of your comments."

Which I doubt. But we had to set up a special appointment because she works part-time, and it's during the hours I save for students.

The effect has not relented. I become more and more convinced that something in the world is unraveling, some thread, thin and gray, hardly noticeable, yet strong, without which the whole fabric will fray.

Of course there is an alternative, more plausible on the face of it. Like many other neurotic deans, I am losing my mind. Is everybody out of step but Johnny? It taxes credulity. I may try all this out on my former shrink, Solly. He helped me a few years back, although I never told him so.

The latest absurdity is the disappearance from the universe of Eduard von Hartmann. I am talking now of something much more serious than the alteration of one word in a play. Hartmann was a tolerably significant German philosopher of the nineteenth century. He published his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* in 1869.

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I once read some of it. I needed a reference on him today, and my notes are not in the "H" file or anywhere else. Nor is he in my *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* or my *Britannica*. I'll check it all out in the library tomorrow, but it's clear that he won't be there. He never lived.

Nevertheless, he did.

How many other names would be missing, if I started looking?

It's later now, and I have done some looking. I wasted two hours verifying hundreds of poets, scientists, sculptors, anybody I could think of.

It doesn't figure. If God (to dredge up a useless hypothesis) wanted to wipe out all trace of a man, even some half-witted dean's ancient notes, wouldn't he do a thorough job of it? Since God is omniscient, he would not only vaporize every written record, he would delete all memories of the man in all minds everywhere, including mine.

So why do I remember the name of Eduard von Hartmann, who never lived?

But, no, nobody else is missing. Not today. Aiken and Arnold, Bichat and Born, Canova and Calder, and many more, they're all safe. So far.

If I were just a little younger, I would start running around urging people to wake up. The sky is falling! The earth is cracking! Wake up!

Somehow it doesn't hit me that way. I have to soldier on. I have to go to the office every day and keep my credibility. It was probably a mistake to speak to Ken Weibley. He made sympathetic noises, but there was something not quite right about his reaction. He may have thought I was sliding into schizophrenia. Anyway, he's gone to Florida again, back to his retirement bungalow in Fort Myers, away from the campus wars he used to fight so well.

Tomorrow the council of deans is meeting, and I've got to give my report on retrenchment. Also I have that damned appointment with Julia Honeycutt.

Useless Hypothesis, help me.

Just as I was unlocking my office door, I caught a glimpse of Julia down the hall. She had obviously been watching me come in, and as I turned my head, she turned hers, but not before I saw the consternation in her eyes. I think she had been crying.

Then, a few minutes later, she was in my doorway, cool and insolent as ever.

"Am I early?" she asked.

I said something polite.

"I guess deans find teaching a nuisance."

"No, not a bit," I lied, smiling. "If I didn't keep my hand in, I'd go crazy."

"Well, good, then I'm here to help preserve your sanity."

I gave an empty chuckle and asked her to take a seat.

"Any one in particular?"

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I felt a blush coming on, because, as it happened, there were only two available chairs, one at the other end of the room, and one just eighteen inches from my own. She took the closer one before I could shift it, and I had to beat a strategic retreat by rolling backward on my swivel chair, pushing off against a corner of the desk with my foot.

Julia smiled.

Out of a worn notebook, she produced a still more frazzled seminar paper. She wanted me to explain why I had given her a "B" instead of a "B+", and what did I mean here and there by writing "too fuzzy" in the margins, and why did I conclude that her paper "lacked substance," and did I prefer lots of padding?

She said she was sorry, but she liked to go straight to the point. Padding was against her principles.

It must have been a come-on. Or a put-down?

The single-sex schools of yore had their merits. Although I still don't find Julia attractive in the normal sense of the word, the ebb and flow of her surely unpadded breasts as she showed me her paper was troublesome.

I patched together various excuses for my comments, and gave her the usual routine about concentrating efforts on the second paper, which, if it were better . . . and so forth and so on.

Eventually she left, vaguely angry.

But late in the afternoon, I saw her going into the library. I followed her in hopes of making peace. She went to a carrel.

Her face was pale, washed clean of all color, except for the fiery blue in her eyes.

"Excuse me," I said, "but we really have to stop feuding like this, if that's what we're doing. I honestly bear no grudges, no resentments."

"I'm sure you don't," she said in a small voice, trying to hide her face. She was not teasing now. It was almost as if she dreaded seeing me.

"But every time we exchange a few words, I feel that you, well, you know, you take some kind of offense. As if I didn't like you."

She looked away from me. "It's not that."

She acted like someone who wanted to disappear.

"So can we just start over, and have a normal, person-to-person relationship?"

"Sure."

It was not Julia Honeycutt at all, except it had to be.

I do not know what to do. Having a student in the classroom who mocks you and finds you tedious (when in fact you might really be tedious, for all you know) and lets everybody see her contempt is a trial.

But perhaps I have misjudged her, and she is actually shy and defensive. The girl in the library this afternoon was not the same as this morning.

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By the way, Eduard von Hartmann is back among the dead. He's in the library catalog and when I looked through my books at home, he was there, too. Could I have got his last name wrong before?

No, because the other philosopher named Hartmann — Nikolai Hartmann — spelled it the same way, and I had checked Nikolai. Eduard would have been right there, next to him. As he is. Now.

But this is subjective evidence. I should have telephoned someone in the philosophy department yesterday, when Eduard did not exist, and taped the conversation. I could have confronted him with the tape today.

That is really the next step. Get unimpeachable evidence.

Et tu, Solly.

I wangled an hour with him this afternoon. Somebody had canceled. He has put on twenty pounds since he talked me out of the post-divorce blues. Is he bored or just fat and happy?

"Still pining for Millie?" he grinned as I sat down. He always shows his patients to a brown leather easy chair half as big as his office. Troubles melt away in its arms. He calls it Mama Bear.

"No, you bastard," I grinned back. "I only think of Millie when I hear somebody's brakes screeching."

"So what's up?"

I made a few false starts, which Solly was too shrewd to buy, and then I plunged.

What did I say?

It has been only a few hours, but I can't reconstruct my exact words. I just let them flow.

Halfway through, he stopped me.

"Ira, listen to yourself. Your voice is getting higher and higher."

I nodded.

"Good, you hear it. So take it easy. You're a baritone, not a tenor. Relax. Give Mama Bear a chance."

I finished my piece, but it must have been chaotic. Solly's eyes were opaque, as usual during a patient's performance. Yet I thought I saw a glint of disbelief, and worse, pity.

"Wow!" he said after a long pause.

"Does it make any sense?" I asked.

"Look, I would never lie to you. I would never bullshit you. You are into some wild symptoms, and what's more, you have to know it."

"Know what?"

"That you're flirting with a psychosis."

"Solly, the world as we define it is—"

"Cut it out, Ira, just please cut it out. The world as we define it is not disintegrating. If it were, I would see it. My secretary would see it. My colleagues would see it. Your colleagues would see it. Your secretary would see it."

I fought with him on point after point. I even got him to call the music store. Of course the Wagner CDs

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were $11.95 each, and had always been $11.95 each.

"I have my receipt! Damn it, Solly, I have my receipt."

But it was no use.

We went around the psychiatric mulberry bush more times than I want to remember.

"Look, Ira, the bottom line is simply this. You are still a rational man. You're discussing this rationally. You know you could be wrong. You're looking for an explanation that would make sense to other people. All this is good."

He took my arm.

"I ask you. Sleep on it. You're not in immediate danger of falling into any hole you can't get out of. But if you nurse this thing, it will grow. Delusions grow by what they feed on. You're a high-strung, overstressed man. You're only three years — O.K., four years — from a murderous divorce. Give it time. And take some of these."

He scribbled out a prescription.

"Trust me."

I keep hearing those two words. "Trust me." He gave me a wink, and a wet handshake, and a squeeze of the elbow.

"Trust me."

I took a long walk after leaving his office. When I meandered back to my car, it had a dozen, or maybe fifteen, orange cats on it.

As I approached the car, they began to jump off. One, then another, then another.

A middle-aged man across the street, well dressed and bearded, threw a snowball at me. The snowball hit a fender harmlessly.

"Hi!" he shouted, smiling.

It has been a week since I last wrote. The tranquilizers dulled my fingers, and everything else, I suppose. But they have not touched the effect.

Eduard von Hartmann is missing again. No longer in the reference books, or in the catalog, or on the shelves. I taped a phone conversation with the chairman of the philosophy department, whose field is German idealism. No, he never heard of him. If Hartmann ever returns to his grave, I will have something to show Solly, or anyone else who wants to listen.

Julie played hooky this week. It was the best class I've had all semester.

The graduate student party was tonight. On the principle of noblesse oblige, I dropped in for half an hour. Since when has a glass of Lake Country Red and a handful of peanuts ruined a man?

Since tonight.

Julia was there, playing the good hostess as she dispensed the filthy stuff from a jug. I gritted my teeth.

She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater and high heels that pushed her breasts up and out. I hon-

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estly don't remember what she had on in between. Her cheeks were glowing, lips red as fire, eyes almost fluorescent.

We exchanged ambiguous smiles as she filled my plastic cup.

Neither of us mentioned her absence on Tuesday.

An appreciative junior colleague took me aside at one point to find out who was in the turtleneck.

I told him it was one of my seminar students. He congratulated me, and we exchanged piggish remarks about her architecture.

Every time I glanced back at the not-so-groaning board, her eyes were following me. She seemed agitated, but it did not stop her eyes. As if they were on stalks.

The party plodded on. Bruce Springsteen was howling in the background from a box that someone had brought.

I moseyed up to the table again to collect a few peanuts. I could tell that she wanted to say something, but the opportunity did not present itself.

Then I set my cup down, surveyed the crowd one more time, and slipped out the door.

I was in the foyer bundling up when I felt Julia's hand. She pulled me over to a darkened stairway out of view. Her grip was firm, and she would not let me go until we got there.

"We have some talking to do," she said. "It can't wait."

I stood at the bottom of the stairs, and she sat down on the fourth or fifth step, so that we were eye to eye.

"You remember J. Alfred Prufrock?" she asked.

It took me a moment to sort it out.

"Should I, after tea and cakes and ices," she began quoting.

I could not remember the rest.

"Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?"

"Oh, yes, 'The Love Song,'" I said. "'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' I haven't read that since I was a freshman."

She looked at me, still a little nervous, but determined to hold the initiative.

"Well, that's me, in a way."

"You?"

She took my hand again. "I guess you're never going to figure it out for yourself. I've been wanting you for a long time."

I could think of nothing to say.

"You don't have to talk to me," she added. "It's my problem."

Never, never, in twenty-five years of chalk and ivy, has a student made any sort of sexual proposal to me. I am not hopelessly gauche or sapless, but women give me a wide berth. Since Millie roared out of town, I have not laid a finger on a single specimen of the sex.

The rest of this is too lunatic to relate.

"Shall I go?" she asked. The pain in those neon eyes was irresistible,

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although I had enough presence of mind to realize that she was also acting out a ritual of female rape. It's not every day that a young woman gets the chance to violate a dean.

We went on talking for almost an hour.

Is it the effect? Actress or not, she is quite sincere in wanting me. But the effect can make anything happen.

Do I want her?

I kept denying it to myself. Afterward I went out into the cold night and wandered through three parking lots before I found my car. I could not force myself to remember where it was. The world had shrunk, somehow, to Julia's eyes.

Obviously, I am in a state.

Whatever is going on, it now attacks my most vulnerable organ.

I have tried to call Julia, but each time I got a friend of hers instead. I disguised my voice.

I hardly know what to do, or what I am doing.

We are both, as it were, riding a cosmic tiger that has escaped from its zoo somewhere.

The anomalies are multiplying. Today I loaded my old Agfa and put it in the car. Whenever I see something, I will get it on film if possible, just to be sure I'm not hallucinating.

Should I tell Julia?

That depends.

But the anomalies are multiplying.

They started this morning shortly after I woke up. I heard hundreds of songbirds warbling in the backyard, for what seemed like ten minutes as I lay in bed planning the day's agenda.

At first I paid no attention. It was all just background noise, and familiar noise at that. But in February? I went to the window and opened it wide, to look for the little rascals in the trees. The songs petered out.

Then I took a couple of Alka-Seltzers, to clear my head. Too much sherry before bedtime. The tablets were pink.

I phoned the nearest pharmacy. The pharmacist confirmed it. Alka-Seltzers have been pink for five years, maybe more. Wrong!

On my way to campus, I saw what looked like a ragged procession of children, half-naked, laughing, showing no signs of frostbite, accompanied by five or six mangy dogs. They were parading down the icy street in shorts and T-shirts and sneakers, their good humor so infectious I smiled in spite of myself.

Several blocks later I passed another, larger gang of children, perhaps as many as thirty-five. I looked for a teacher, who might be taking them on a field trip, but they were alone, without a care in the world. They wore the same sort of clothes.

"Aren't you people cold?" I called out the window of my car as I slowed to catch a closer look.

"No way, José!" one of them shouted.

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I haven't heard that expression in years. I drove off.

Then I remembered my camera and went back to take a picture. I had gone less than half a mile, but could I find those kids? No. They might have turned a corner and trooped into a building. But they were so aimless, so unhurried, as though it were June and school had just let out for the summer.

At the office, it was a day for staring. Almost everyone I spoke to was staring at something, and I could scarcely get their attention. A dozen times I noticed Sylvia staring out the window.

"What *are* you looking at?" I asked, finally.

She did not turn her head, or reply.

"Sylvia?"

"Yes, Mr. Walker?"

I asked her again.

But she really couldn't explain. I looked out the window myself, and it was just a gray day, overcast, with snow everywhere, and people in parkas trudging along, and nothing whatever that called for a second glance.

"I guess I'm getting a little spacey, waiting for spring," she said finally.

"Aren't we all?" I laughed. But the next time I looked, Sylvia was staring at the pencil sharpener.

Even the candidates who came to see me were spacey. I interview three or four nearly every day, now that it's recruiting season, and usually they're polite and talkative, but not this lot. I had five appointments all together, three men and two women. They all stared. One of them stared at me, the others picked something else. Often they would not even try to answer a question.

"Would you be comfortable living in a town of this size?"

Stare.

"Will you have your doctorate by May?"

Stare.

"Are there any questions about the job that you'd like to ask me?"

Stare.

One autistic candidate I could believe, maybe even two in a row. Not five.

Somehow or other I got through the whole day without a committee meeting, but it would have been curious: a meeting of people staring at their shoes, with no one disposed to talk.

Better yet, this could have been an academic council day. Surely somebody would have noticed the impossibility of it, in that case. But I suppose not. I am still, as far as I know, the only Johnny in this particular line of march. It gets lonely.

I have made up my mind about Julia.

Reading over these notes, I see that I have been in love with Julia for a good many days without knowing it. Why was I so slow to understand?

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It is clear that we are going to become lovers.

Yesterday I had "made up my mind"— to push her away.

But now, in the empty gray morning after fitting together all that I have thought and written, I know what I must do.

I phoned her just a minute ago. She wants to wait until Valentine's Day. Our first time must be in her place, among her things. She has agreed to withdraw from the seminar, too. She doesn't need the credit, and I don't need the guilt.

She was very tranquil, on the phone. Like a lion after dinner.

But mine is still to be served, and I find myself padding back and forth hungrily. I want to snarl and laugh at the same time.

Julia, do you really love me? Is it possible?

This is too good a feeling to be anything but wrong, through and through. The effect has made me more vulnerable than usual. If life is breaking up, the rosebuds had better be gathered soon.

But could Julia love me?

Why not, for a while?

Brian Locke has stopped by. More to the point, he knows about the effect. The relief is indescribable, greater even than the solving of Julia, if only because it helps to make Julia possible. Fair maids, given a choice, prefer faint hearts to cracked brains.

I should have got in touch with Brian sooner. For weeks he's been out of town on business, but I knew he was back.

Anyway, he came over for a drink, and in no time at all I told him the whole story.

Old friends are best.

What matters is that he has witnessed the effect himself, puzzled over it, even tried to explain it.

He thinks it represents a sudden upsurge in randomness in the microcosm. Ordinarily the indeterminancy theorized by Heisenberg has no relevance in the big world: if subatomic particles flit about freely, the law of averages nevertheless catches up with them, and none of us is the worse for it.

But sometimes — randomly —the randomness may exceed its normal levels and cause small holes or rips in the fabric of the continuum.

Metaphorically, of course. In the real world, he says, there are no holes, just statistical anomalies that tend to correct themselves over the long run. And it may be a function of these anomalies that most people screen them out.

What he says makes practically no sense to me, but at this point I don't much care. At least I am not hallucinating. Another human being is in the same boat. The problem is out there, not in my skull.

What I most needed from him was

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his own raw experience of the effect, and at first he seemed reluctant to descend into details. He wanted to hear everything that had happened to me. You could almost see him checking off the encounters, matching them to his, feeling his own sense of confirmation, although he has always been more self-assured than I.

But finally he gave me what I asked for. Some of it is more curious and frightful than my stuff, although clearly we are referring to the same effect.

The worst thing, for Brian, was losing a whole day on his trip. He went to bed in his hotel on a Friday, cold sober, and woke up at the usual time Sunday morning. But it couldn't have been amnesia, because no one would tell him anything about Saturday. He could not find a Saturday newspaper, or get a report on Saturday's weather from a bellhop, or pick up the smallest crumb of information about Saturday's convention activities from his associates.

When he returned to his office, he found a new secretary on duty, whom he had never seen before. But she claimed to have been hired — by Brian himself — the week before he left on his trip.

And he, too, has seen strange straggling bands of people out on the streets, people who do not belong there, at the wrong times, doing the wrong things.

"Bits and pieces of time are dropping through vents in the continuum," he said in a quiet voice. "We have to do something, you and I."

"But how can we reverse an effect in the continuum?" I asked.

"We can't. The only hope is to form a network of insiders who realize what's happening, a support group to help us all hang on to our sanity."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

We shook hands, as if we were sealing a pact.

Each of us will try to recruit members, without being too obvious about it. Pretty soon we'll start photocopying a newsletter to provide a written record of the anomalies, and some of us will take pictures and tape conversations. As the network expands and connects with similar groups in other cities, we may eventually become a sort of government in exile.

It remains to be seen whether the effect will let us get away with this. But if two people like Brian and I have been able to stay coherent through all that has happened, I see no reason why we can't pull it off.

As long as we preserve our cool and our credibility.

More later.

The lunacy of the day was a meeting in the Veep's office. Just Zack and me, so I could get a sense of the administration plans for the arts and sciences budget next time around.

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At first Zack seemed entirely normal. His heavy brows, like the late Leonid Brezhnev's, performed their usual acrobatics, up and down, up and down, as he rattled on, quoting reports, statistics, scraps of conversation with one or another potentate of our little world.

I hardly recall any of it now. But I got every word on my pocket recorder.

One thing stood out. We were slated for status quo, at best. Cannibalizing the a. & s. salary package to help build up the medical and business programs remains on the table, or at least that's what Zack wants me to believe.

"But you and your staff will be brought into the discussions the minute they get really serious. I promise you."

The brows nearly popped off his head as he said it.

I was just sliding into my ritual response on the impossibility of locating one more molecule of fat in a. & s., when he interrupted me with a laugh.

Zack, of course, hardly ever laughs. A single dry snort is usually the limit of his merrymaking, but this was an authentic ha-ha-ha, rising two or three notes up the scale and falling back down again to the note on which it had all begun.

His eyes gleamed.

"Sorry to break in like that," he said, "but you really should hear yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Ira, Ira, Ira, lighten up. This is all such exquisitely stupid shit."

He laughed again, and on the second try, his ha-ha-ha went up the scale without returning.

I decided to take no offense.

"And what do you call the propaganda you've just been feeding me?", I asked.

He paused, as if to reflect, then cocked his head at a queer angle and grinned boyishly.

"The biggest, richest, brownest turd you'll ever see if you dean for the rest of your sweet life."

He laughed uncontrollably and started capering around me.

"Lighten up!" he cried. "Don't be an old fart, Ira! Nothing matters!"

His secretary came in with an armful of file folders. Seeing his mood, she dumped them in a chair and they linked arms and danced a clumsy jig.

I left quietly. They were no longer interested in me.

Brian came over before dinner. We ran the tape of my conference with the Veep. We ran it twice, and he agrees, even though he's never met Zack. It has to be the effect.

The only thing that bothers me is that Brian never heard of Eduard von Hartmann. Brian has been out of academe for many years, but he knows philosophy and physics with a passion and his memory is phenomenal.

We can't tell which of us is at fault. It's a little thing, yet it makes

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me uneasy, because it's the first evidence we have had that one of us, at least, lacks full immunity.

When Brian left, I thawed a frozen lasagne, wolfed it, and dressed down (not up!) for Julia.

I should have started this entry with a song to her, a hymn of thanksgiving for this mad blessing.

Let me say it here, in the privacy of my pages. I love you, Julia. In you there is something pure and aboriginal, something from the forests, a prehuman innocence. You are a scheming human female but also a young animal, muzzle to the wind, full of the silence of the ancient woods.

She is actually quite beautiful, and it's not my lover's blindness. The change is in her. She sees me now as a friend, who has persuaded her not to be afraid. Before, she thought I was unreachable, and it made her face hard, her lips tight and angry. What appeared to be ugliness was only fright. My acceptance has changed everything. I want her to believe me.

Tonight, St. Valentine's Night, was more than I could ever have given myself in my dearest dreams.

I brought her a heart-shaped box of purple gumdrops. She told me once that those are her favorite kind, but they're not available separately, so I got five pounds of assorted colors and picked out just the purples.

She did not come to the door. It was open a crack when I arrived. I rapped a few times, announced myself, and stepped inside.

She was standing by a window in the warm little parlor of her apartment, in a silky gown, with a large red ribbon tied around her left wrist. Her breasts struggled against the fabric, and her mouth, her lovely mouth with the slightly drooping Habsburg lower lip, was pursed like a heart.

"See," she said, holding up her wrist, "I come gift-wrapped."

I kissed her hand, which is very small and white, and then her mouth, for several minutes. Her lips were delectably soft. . .

We joked about her taste for erotic theater. She is sophisticated and naive at the same time, as becomes a lady of twenty-two.

I kissed her again and began to explore the roundnesses of her back and hips, but she held my arm tightly and would not let me continue.

"We're doing this my way," she said. "All in good time."

She opened the refrigerator and brought back a bottle of Dom Ruinart blanc de blancs, which cost her a fortune. She knew that I would know. We drank two glasses each, from what looked like sherbet cups, and talked, and kissed, and ate purple gumdrops, until I was almost incoherent with desire.

I explained my private metaphor of the whales at sea, which made her smile. She pushed her nose between the buttons of my shirt. Her lips brushed my chest.

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We were half-sitting, half-sprawling on her sofa, a venerable piece of student furniture that must have changed owners fifty times.

"You may see one whale," she said, very softly. "This is my favorite."

She let the strap of her gown slip over her right shoulder. It slithered down her arm, and suddenly a breast was free, as plump and round and rosy as a breast can be.

I cupped it in my hand and kissed the bud tenderly.

"You do believe in obeying the law," I murmured.

She arched an eyebrow.

"I mean the law about truth in advertising," I added.

"Funny, funny."

But my mouth was too busy, and too full, to say anything else. With a second well-practiced wriggle, she unveiled her other breast, just a shade smaller than its sister.

She lifted her arms above her head so that both breasts stood out high and firm.

She told me that her part-time job, which collided with my office hours, is modeling for life classes in our school of fine arts. Not the usual mode of employment for an a. & s. grad student, but why not?

"It's quiet work," she said. "And I know how to hold a pose."

Oh, yes.

I kept on about my business, until at last she moved my head to one side and offered me her wrist, the one adorned with the big red ribbon.

"Now take off the bow," she said, "and then you can unwrap the rest of your present."

It was not easy, but I did everything slowly, making the moment last as long as possible.

She stretched out fresh and naked on the sofa, exuding a bouquet of scents of the complexity one might imagine from an odalisque by Matisse.

I made love to her for three hours.

When I dressed to leave, she was fast asleep, and I parted her pale bush for one final syrupy kiss.

Can you love me, Julia?

Julia has kept me too busy to write for a while. She is a maze of surprises and contradictions.

She seems to have only two close friends, a married fellow graduate student who is a good-natured tomboy, and Don. The tomboy is fine, but I could manage without Don. He lives in the building next door, and has been for all his thirty years a devout gay. They like to talk art and music, and their tastes in such matters run along parallel lines, but he is a cold, prissy bastard who brings out the latent homophobe in me. Julia spaces us so that I don't have to see him.

But all that counts is Julia. She does love me, in her curious way. Now that she has me in her power, all the old hostility is gone, and we are comfortable with each other.

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She tells me she has never met a man so gentle and considerate. Our affair convinces her to abjure young men forever. There was quite a parade before I came along.

Yet in high school (she says) she was a wallflower, a brainy girl who never dated and ate too much.

I have sworn her to secrecy about our relationship, even where Don and the tomboy are concerned. They know that she and I are more than teacher and student, but not the whole story.

Apparently the effect has avoided her. She has noticed nothing unusual. When I sound her out, as I have done gingerly two or three times, she does not pick up my hints.

But the effect has continued, in other quarters of my life, and I think it may be growing worse.

Brian and I have collected at least a dozen photographs of people behaving oddly or outrageously in public places, including three shots of a long procession that I saw in Veterans Park, a procession mostly of women in clown suits who each carried a light plastic baseball bat. The bats were harmless toys, the kind you would give to a small boy, but now and then one of the women would rush at a bystander with a bloodcurdling scream and hit him over the head or shoulder. The bystander would scream back, and then laugh and turn away, none the worse for the mock beating.

I asked one of them why all this was going on, and he said, "Hell, man, it's Mardi Gras."

Actually it was, or close enough. But in this dour northern city, a thousand miles and more from New Orleans?

The Veep, of course, had reverted to his old sober self the next time I saw him. He responded indignantly when I made a crack about his dancing with his secretary. Wanted to know what the hell I was talking about. I will have to mend fences, although I'm not sure how to manage it. Zack is the sort of man who never forgets a breach of etiquette.

Brian thinks he may have turned up the first recruit. An unlikely find: the director of the mental ward of St. Luke's Hospital. They're both members of the local chess club.

I told him about my experiences with Solly, but Brian says that psychiatrists are as different from one another as anybody else. He's positive that this man is immune to the effect and could prove to be a valuable ally.

I suppose so.

At least Brian is with me. For thirty years now I have known Brian Locke, since we met at Princeton in our sophomore year, and I cannot think of anyone I would trust so unquestioningly. Whether this third member of our projected conspiracy works out or not, the two of us will see the thing through.

He sticks to his theory of a crest-

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ing wave of indeterminancy.

"The only other idea that makes sense is mass hysteria," he said tonight.

I frowned. "Caused by what?"

He thought for a moment. "A new virus in the air. A fair number of mental problems have been traced to physiological disorders, you know, so why not a bug that upsets the body's chemistry and produces the effect? With all the filth in the atmosphere these days, from lead to strontium 90, every kind of mutation is possible."

I pointed out that his theory would not explain how books have changed, how animals have changed, how the world itself is not quite the same.

He's not sure. Perhaps Hartmann is still in the encyclopedias and the libraries, for example, but we can't see him because toxins in the virus interfere selectively with memory and vision.

Incidentally, I have now checked with friends in other states, and they can find no trace of Hartmann either, nor does anyone remember him at all.

And a few other names have dropped out of the world. None of the people I checked earlier. But I ran across two new ones, obscure English composers that I used to have in my collection of LPs. The records are gone, and the composers don't appear in my Schwann catalog or in my *Grove's.*

We are thinking of doing a careful, line-by-line review of one volume of the *Britannica,* to see how many anomalies we can spot. Obviously, if I've turned up some missing people, there are others, along with various altered dates, places, events, perhaps some new "people" to replace those who have disappeared. But we'll have to rely on memory, and I cannot be entirely confident either of mine or of Brian's.

It's like trying to swim upstream in a river of molasses. Everything clutches you, tries to pull you down and in.

My only solace is Julia.

After the past forty-eight hours, I read the words above with a kind of dull horror. Brian and I keep talking as if this were a puzzle or a game or a mission impossible in a television thriller. Meanwhile, the fabric unravels faster and faster.

We can hardly waste our time poring over encyclopedias.

Whether the problem originates in the physical microcosm or the biological, it is no longer really manageable, and we've got to find others who are unaffected and withdraw to some safe retreat.

Yesterday was almost normal. Julia and I sneaked off to a matinee, entering the theater separately and meeting in the back row. Afterward she cooked me a beautiful dinner of falafel and rice. Our lovemaking grows

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steadily better. We found a way for her to climax, something she had never been able to do with a man. We call it the Oral Exam.

But how much time do we have to enjoy each other?

Whatever it is, it will never be enough.

Then came today. Julia is out of town, visiting her father and stepmother in the boondocks somewhere, and I had a full schedule at school. Meetings, interviews, dictating a dozen overdue letters and memorandums.

I was wakened by a delegation of musicians standing on my porch playing deadly Protestant hymns at 6:30 A.M. The session with Julia had lasted until two, so it took me awhile to get my eyes open.

They were all dressed in fur coats, men and women alike, puffing away on their horns as if the Day of Judgment had just dawned. A bass drum supplied the lugubrious beat.

When I poked my head out the door, one of the puffers stopped for a bar or two to cry out, "Bless you, brother!"

I made a jaundiced comment about the Apocalypse.

"You're wrong, brother," said the same man, and they all stopped playing, in mid-phrase. "It's the Day of No-Judgment."

"It's the day when I think I'll call the police and have you crackpots locked up," I said. "Do you know what time it is?"

He beamed. "Yes," he said jubilantly, "it's the Kairos."

A woman joined in. "The moment of decision, for you, for all of us!"

I asked what they wanted me to decide.

"To live or to die," the woman smiled. "If you look inside that trombone, you'll see what I mean."

I looked where her gloved finger was pointing. Inside the bell they had managed to rig what looked like a functional shotgun.

"It's connected to one of the valves. B-flat and you're dead. Give us all your money and you've risen to the challenge of the Kairos."

Fortunately my wallet was almost empty. I opened it, showed them its contents, and handed over three one-dollar bills.

"Bless you, brother!" the woman shouted.

The others mumbled thanks and tipped their hats. They started playing again, and moved on to the next house, where my neighbors came out in their pajamas and flung their arms around as many members of the troupe as they could.

I thought of warning them, but before I could say a word, they had invited everyone inside for coffee and doughnuts.

The phone was out of order when I tried to call the police. Since then I have found no live phone anywhere.

As I drove toward campus, I saw the streets filling up with an unbe-

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lievable mixture of people. Children, as before, but now men and women of all ages, too, wandering this way and that, some alone, some in groups. Thousands of cats and dogs accompanied them, prancing along as if they owned the world. I even saw a pair of goats, and overhead all kinds of small birds banked and wheeled, many of them too brightly feathered to be wintertime residents of this Thule of ours.

Bands were playing, much more impressive than the thieves who had wakened me earlier. One of them, fifty strong, tooted away in the middle of one of the busiest intersections in town. It was all I could do to get by.

Eventually the traffic became too thick and unruly to drive at all. I parked four blocks from campus, ignorning the meter, and continued on foot.

At one point I saw a policeman, or a reasonable facsimile of one, wearing a regulation blue uniform except for his pants, a pair of tight faded jeans, and his beautifully tooled cowboy boots. I marched up to him.

"Officer, can you tell me what the celebration is all about?"

"It's on the radio, friend. Governor Larsen has declared a special Lenten holiday. All day and maybe tomorrow."

I asked him if the university was closed.

He stared at me for a moment. "You're really out of it. Everything is closed. And I'm not on duty, either."

A teenager handed him a burning joint. The policeman took a deep puff.

"See what I mean?" he grinned, blowing a cloud of sweet smoke in my direction.

In the next block, people were less convivial. I saw two men fighting in the gutter, rolling over and over, as blood streamed from their faces. Spectators cheered them on.

The policeman in the cowboy boots came running up and gave one of the men a savage kick in the ribs.

"Stop them!" I yelled at him.

"I'm not on duty!" he yelled back, and kicked the other man in the head.

One by one, other people joined in, including a tough-looking woman and a couple of muddy little kids.

Across the street a second brawl started, which soon drew its own ring of excited fans and kibitzers.

Things were getting dangerous. Nobody seemed in any way surprised or even frightened by the spectacle. As I left, I could see over my shoulder the police officer beating someone — I could swear — to death. After a hard uppercut to the jaw, the victim's head snapped back and wobbled, as though his neck were broken. I felt my breakfast rising in my throat. The man crumpled and fell heavily to the sidewalk.

When I reached the campus gate,

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I saw a naked young woman, lying flat on her back with legs apart and a Coke bottle halfway up her vagina. The guard at the gatehouse paid no attention to her.

Before I could do anything, three undergraduates brushed by me and carried her off, singing some innocuous beer-hall ditty. I could tell that she was still alive. The Coke bottle fell out of her and smashed on the pavement as she was borne away like a Sabine woman.

I had no luck getting the guard's interest. He gazed into space with an empty smile on his face.

Inside, the campus was deserted. I found no one. All the phones were dead, all the lights were off, there was no heat, nothing.

The rest of this awful day continued as it had begun. It took me two hours to get home again, and more than once I almost abandoned my car. The streets were mobbed with revelers. Now and then I saw bodies sprawled in various positions suggesting death, but never an ambulance or any sign of law and order.

I think a child was run over and killed by the car in front of me, just two blocks from my house. I'm not sure. The driver stopped, got out, took a blanket from her trunk, and went around to the front of her car. A few seconds later she returned with something wrapped in the blanket and dumped it into the trunk. She glanced up at me and broke into laughter at the expression on my face. I drove on, not knowing what else to do.

What should I have done? About any of this?

Later I went out, trying to find Brian, with no success, and saw more horrors. Thank heavens Julia was not in town, although she may have been exposed to worse, for all I know.

What worries me now is that Brian has been killed or maimed by some lunatic. He would certainly have tried to reach me. All I know is that he's not home.

Something else bothers me. I did not think to take any pictures. Only now, in the dead of night, has it occurred to me. I could have shot fifty rolls, but somehow or other I managed to forget that I have a camera. Was that the effect, working in me? Or nervous strain?

The radio (there's no television) says that tomorrow will be a "special Lenten Holiday" as well. No reasons are given, no explanations.

I'll have to bolt my doors and stay home.

Just a moment ago the lights went out. I have plenty of candles.

But I didn't stay home.

My alarm rang at eight o'clock, and two minutes later Brian called. Said he was concerned about me. The electrical system of his car failed on the highway, and he had spent all of

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yesterday nursing it back to health in some ill-equipped rural garage. He knew next to nothing about the holiday or the carnage in town. He couldn't even call me, because the phone service was down.

Anyway, we arranged to meet at St. Luke's Hospital tomorrow. Brian has an appointment to see his doctor friend.

I told him there was no time for more research, but he was adamant. It wouldn't be research, he said. The doctor was definitely on our side, and he might have recruited a few people himself. Together we could make an inventory of our needs, pool our resources, and trek to shelter in the state forest up north by next weekend.

"But you'll have to tell Julia," he added.

I grunted.

"Look, Ira, if you love the girl, you can't leave her in this place."

Of course he was right.

As it turns out, I needn't have worried. Julia will be coming with us.

Right after I settled things with Brian, I phoned her. She was still asleep, but happy to hear from me.

"I'm just lying here in my bare skin," she said, in a husky, early-morning voice. She yawned once or twice. "Just me and my furry pussy."

"Don't move. I'll be right over," I told her.

She laughed. "But Congo wants her breakfast."

Congo is her black kitten.

As I read these lines, I can see how pixilated I have become. It is obscene for a duffer like me to take so much pleasure in a young woman's love. But whenever I see her or talk to her, it's as if a door had opened into a summer garden. All at once everything is warm and secure. Iridescent insects buzz and flowers hold up their rosy mouths to be kissed. The sky is always indigo.

Julia lives in a pocket of the world where the effect has not been able to reach, where everyone is safe.

But things were reasonably quiet this morning. The electricity has come back and the telephones are working again. On the streets as I drove to Julia's apartment, I noticed only a few hapless stragglers. It felt like a day after, like Christmas or New Year's.

I was not surprised to find that she had missed the mayhem. Her father and she had snowmobiled all day, and when she returned, very late, she had gone straight to bed.

After we made love, I tried to explain to her about Brian, and the effect, and especially yesterday. The story of the woman who ran over the little child made her cry a little.

Nevertheless, she believes me, and she has agreed to join us up north, if that's what we decide to do.

The only problem, which may not be a problem at all, is her neighbor Don. Lately she has begun to feel curiosity about his sex life as a gay man

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and how he reacts to women.

"I wonder what he's like in bed," she said.

"You're not attracted to him?" I asked.

She admitted it would be a waste of time for any woman.

I felt my neck tingle and redden.

"I'm just curious," she said again, with a teasing little smile.

I reminded her that gays harbor more than their share of venereal disease.

"Oh, don't talk like Dad," she frowned. "You're not him, you know, Freud or no Freud. And I'm not your pet canary. I know how to take care of myself."

My mouth was suddenly dry. I swallowed hard.

"Forget it," she said. "I promised to abandon civilization with you, and I will. You have more important things to worry about, ya big lug."

She gave me a playful punch in the arm, and we kissed.

I brought her back home, and we spent the rest of the day making love and listening to records. This evening the streets were empty.

I am writing this in bed. But not in my own bed. It has been an unpredictable day, like many others, yet in some ways entirely unique. So far as the world knows, I am now a patient in the mental ward at St. Luke's.

For my own protection. It's for the best.

After the almost unnerving calm of yesterday, the effect started up again at dawn. Nearly every man, woman, child, and animal in town had piled into the streets by the time I awoke, and all were wailing like paid mourners at an Oriental funeral.

"Ooh ah, ooh ah, oooh!"

The noise was dreadful. The sweet stink of death hung in the air.

I walked from corner to corner, and everywhere I looked, it was the same. Improvised percussion bands, beating makeshift gongs and drums, and row upon row of swaying celebrants in bathrobes and nightgowns, making tuneless music together in honor of the dead.

In the intersections they had heaped bodies, sometimes two or three, sometimes as many as a dozen. The victims of the first Lenten holiday? I don't know, but there must have been a lot.

"Ooh ah, ooh ah, oooh!"

It made me think of the chorus of snoring soldiers in *Wozzeck*.

I tried to pull one or two of the mourners aside, to ask them what was going on, and who had ordered the services, but it was useless.

After walking for miles, I stopped to get my bearings and consider what to do. A glance at my watch made the decision for me. Brian had insisted that I not be late, and I could just make it, if I picked up my speed a little.

By the time I reached St. Luke's,

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the landscape was very different. The files of mourners had melted away, and all the ordinary street sights and noises had returned, as if on cue.

Let me get to the point. Brian's doctor friend is all I could have hoped for. His name is Marty Jacobs. Did I say that he and Brian play chess together? They're obviously a lot thicker than Brian led me to believe.

Anyway, Marty welcomed me like a long-lost cousin, if not a brother, and we hit it off well.

We talked first about the hospital. It's functioning with a skeleton staff, and there are few patients left.

"People prefer to die at home," he said with a sigh. "These are sad days for a doctor."

I asked what the health authorities planned to do about the corpses stacked in the street, and his eyes rolled to the ceiling. He simply did not know. It was beyond explaining. I gather that he and Brian were in the hospital all morning and saw only what could be viewed from the windows.

Brian seemed curiously subdued until we got to discussing the causes of the effect. Then his eyes flashed and he became quite talkative. We discussed his ideas on the surge of indeterminancy, and also the viral theory.

Finally he looked at me expectantly, as if I were supposed to add something.

"Ira's been kicking around another explanation," he said.

I had to admit that I didn't know what he was driving at.

"You remember," he coaxed. "The suggestion about the aliens."

"No, frankly I don't remember," I said. "If I've ever thought of anything, it's gone now, believe me."

"Don't be shy," Marty smiled. "You're with friends, Ira. Any hypothesis, wild or not, is worth considering."

The truth is, all the ideas about the effect have come from Brian. I was born without a flyspeck of scientific imagination.

After an awkward pause, Brian stepped into the breach.

"Well, maybe I did think of it first. Who remembers anything for sure these days?"

We exchanged sympathetic glances.

"Briefly, it's this," Brian continued. "Suppose Earth is an experiment, a research project in advanced exogeology and exobiology, only we're not the scientists."

Marty's face lit up. "Hmmm! That's where the aliens come in."

"Exactly. This experiment is their baby, and now they've changed some of the rules of the game to see how we respond. Perhaps hallucinogens in the water supply, with certain test subjects naturally immune — or treated with the antidote. In which case the three of us are the whole point of the experiment.

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"It could even be that the alien scientists are on holiday, and the graduate assistant they've left in charge is monkeying with their computers."

I gave a dry laugh. "More likely the village idiot has wandered into the lab," I said.

Just then we heard a crash outside.

A bus had collided with another bus, knocking it on its side. A crowd was gathering, and victims were being yanked out of a half-open door.

"Oh, no," Marty whispered.

I looked more closely.

It was hard to see everything from the fifth floor of the hospital, but the victims were being manhandled.

The driver of the first bus grabbed a screaming child by its heels and whirled it around and around, smashing its head against a heavy lamppost. On the third swing, the head broke and spattered, like a pumpkin hitting a wall.

"Why do they hate the victims of the crash?" Brian asked in a quiet voice.

"Paranoid rage," Marty said. "In ancient Greece, people used to kill messengers who brought bad news."

We talked for a while longer, laying plans to leave town. Marty thinks he can persuade another doctor and three nurses to come along with us. Counting Julia, that would make eight of us, enough to form a survival colony.

But we agreed that until we can round up enough supplies and transportation, we should treat the hospital as our headquarters. It's no longer safe out in town. Brian has a handgun, which he'll carry with him at all times if he has to be on the streets, and we'll spend the next night or two in whatever empty hospital beds take our fancy. Marty has "checked" me in. Nobody at the hospital asked any difficult questions about me.

I helped myself to a deluxe private room. Actually one of the nurses that Marty trusts showed me to it. He's a male nurse named John, a tall, quiet fellow in his late twenties. He's used to working odd hours, and he's standing guard outside my door right now, in case any of the patients or staff members turn violent. But this corridor seems deserted.

Tomorrow Brian will fetch Julia. I'll feel much better when she's here.

More surprises. Brian telephoned this morning to say that he's on to something very big and will have to go out of town for a little while. He didn't want to discuss it over the phone, which I can understand, given the circumstances. He promised to look in on Julia before he leaves.

Marty visited me twice. Some of the administrators suspect that he's not on the level, whatever that means nowadays, so he must be careful. On the second visit, he had another doctor with him, an exotic middle-aged brunette with a heavy Hungarian ac-

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cent who kept watching him nervously. I have to assume she's not the colleague of Marty's who will join us up north.

I met three or four of my fellow patients, all quite harmless. One is a retired psychology professor who remembers the name of Eduard von Hartmann perfectly well. Perhaps Hartmann has blinked into history again. I can't be sure without access to a library.

I don't enjoy marking time like this, but recollections of the mass funeral rites and the bus riot are too fresh in my mind. It's safer here.

The nurses (not John) give me little pills with my food. I've been taking them. Placebos, I suppose.

I'm losing track of the days. Feeling drowsy all the time.

Brian has not called, but Marty says everything is O.K.

"The main thing is not to worry," he said.

I stay in my room all day unless I'm out in the solarium chatting with some of the mental patients. I've become friendly with the old professor. We like to reminisce about campus life, although it seems far away for both of us.

The best thing was when the phone rang and it was Julia. She promises to visit me tomorrow, but I persuaded her also to bring her luggage with her and stay here until we are ready.

I wonder why John is so quiet. He agrees with everything I say, but I can't get him to open up.

I have been crying.

Also, I have stopped taking the little pills, which I think were not placebos. Marty doesn't deny it.

Julia came to see me this afternoon, without her luggage.

I was sitting in my easy chair by the window, reading an old magazine.

She looked so beautiful, dressed out of character in a slim gray business suit with a black ribbon tie. I rose to kiss her, but she held me away with an almost imperceptible touch of her soft hand.

"Lord, it's been so long," I said. "Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"No," she replied.

I asked her if the streets were safe today.

She nodded.

"But tell me," she went on, "how have you been? You're the patient, after all."

I laughed. "Still crazy after all these years," I said.

I made another pass at her, which she deflected gracefully.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Her little face took on a serious mien, as if she had something unpleasant to say.

"You won't like it," she replied after a pause.

I winced. "Go on. Bad news is

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common these days.

"It's about Don."

"What about Don?"

She looked at me, but I could read nothing in her eyes. They were empty.

"He and I are lovers now. I'm sorry."

I stared out the window.

"I know it shouldn't have happened," she said.

I turned to face her. "It couldn't have happened. He's as gay as a dozen fruitcakes."

"I guess he's not anymore."

"You love him?"

"Yes."

"It can't last."

"Maybe not."

"It's the effect. Don't you see? It's another ridiculous twist of reality, another joke from the microcosm."

She shook her head. "I think this would have happened no matter what. Don never had a woman before, he didn't realize what he wanted. Besides, he loves me. You have to understand. People change."

I felt the tears coming.

"I don't intend to start a survival colony with Don in it," I said, trying to laugh, and instead I found myself crying hysterically.

I reached out to hold her, but she turned away.

"Julia, you're the same person you were the last time we met. I'm the same person. Maybe Don changed, but I haven't. I still love you. Our flesh still craves the flesh it craved before. Nothing has changed between us, we're still—"

I stopped, because it was too obvious that she had become, where I am concerned, cold and numb.

"We don't have to be strangers," she said in a small voice. "I wouldn't want that."

"Spare me the compassion."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "You have to believe that Don is good for me. Until I got to know him, I thought I'd never meet another man as warm and gentle as you."

"What the hell do you mean?" I took her shoulders and resisted the urge to shake them. "You've known him longer than you have me."

"Don't shout," she said. "He and I had never gone to bed before, that's all. It makes a difference."

"So he's a clone of me, only younger?"

"Yes."

"But why do you need a substitute, when you already have the real thing?"

She did not answer, and I let her go.

I have been crying ever since she left. Sometimes I howl. I don't give a damn what anyone here thinks about it. They're all certifiably crazy anyway. What harm can one more screamer do?

It also no longer matters whether we evacuate to the north woods.

If I had the great Useless Hypothesis in my power right now, I would

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cut him open and wring his neck with his own guts.

The day after. Nothing makes any sense. I have not heard from Brian. He must be dead.

Marty keeps visiting me, usually with the Hungarian in tow.

Tonight he was alone.

I asked him about Brian.

"I'm sure Brian's fine," he smiled, patting my arm.

I asked him when he plans for us to leave.

"It's time we started approaching this problem more realistically," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"In order for you to get well," he began, "we have to work on some of your assumptions."

"Cut the doctor act," I growled. "We're alone, and it's not funny."

He patted my arm. "O.K., suit yourself. Take your time. But sooner or later—"

"What in the name of the Grand Panjandrum of all panjandrums are you talking about?" I shrieked. "I'm not your patient, damn it. We're immune to the effect, you and I and Brian. We're getting ready to hunt out a shelter somewhere in the state forest. Don't shit on me about getting well!"

He reached over to feel my forehead, clucking something soft and soothing.

I slapped him away from me.

He looked hurt.

Just then John came in, and the two of them held me down and gave me a shot. It didn't wear off until a few minutes ago. I have to write while I can. I must get out of here.

Obviously it was all a charade. I think Brian had to be part of it. They played along with me, even invented explanations of the effect for me, so I would wind up in this room. The door is now locked, the window barred.

All that remains to me is my notes. I brought them to show Marty when I came to the hospital, but I never got around to it, so he doesn't know they exist. A small, sad consolation.

Still, they are important. I've read them over, and everything jibes with my recollections. They are the only reality outside myself that does not change or lie. They will prove to somebody someday that not every human being was trapped in this labyrinth of folly.

Right now I can hear nurses and orderlies in the corridor, laughing and joking. They plan what they call a manhunt tonight. They will go out on the streets, bag some passerby, bring him back, and "experiment" on him. From what they say, this has been happening all week. One of the nurses in the gang is John.

It's only a matter of time until they bag me.

I keep the notes well hidden.

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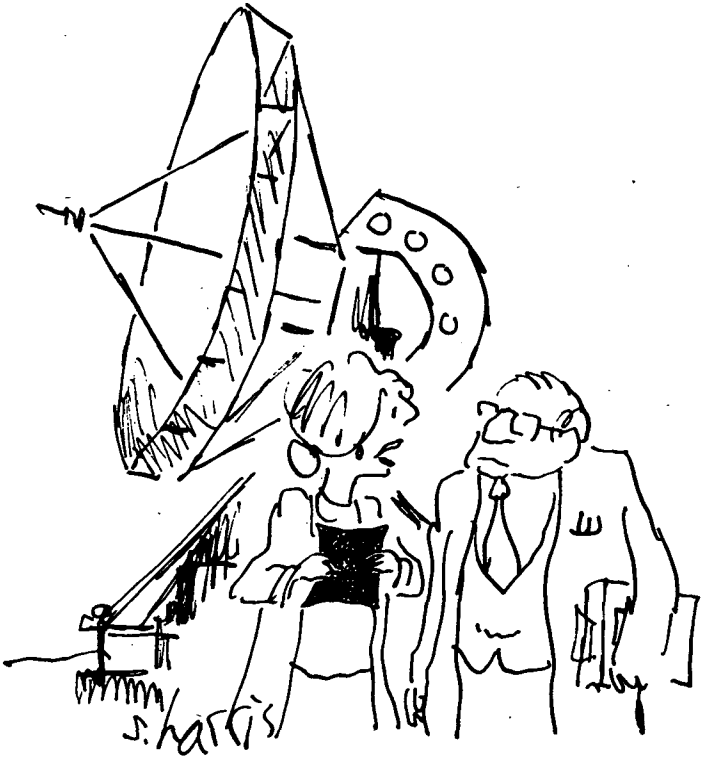
I've been remembering Ken Weibley, who died so many years ago. We used to talk about how someday he would retire to a bungalow in Florida, and how every summer when he came north, we'd get together for dinner and a concert or play. He never got the chance.

I wonder, could he have explained the effect, if he had lived? Would he have been immune?

He was surely immune to the nastiness of campus politics. No department ever had a sweeter chairman.

The weeks have slipped away. Soon it will be Easter.

I am helpless here. I have stopped looking for a way out. I treat every small pleasure, every comfort, every meal, as though it were my last. Now that everything is over, I feel much better.



"If it does collapse into itself, it will be the last word on contemporary packaging: The Disposable Universe."

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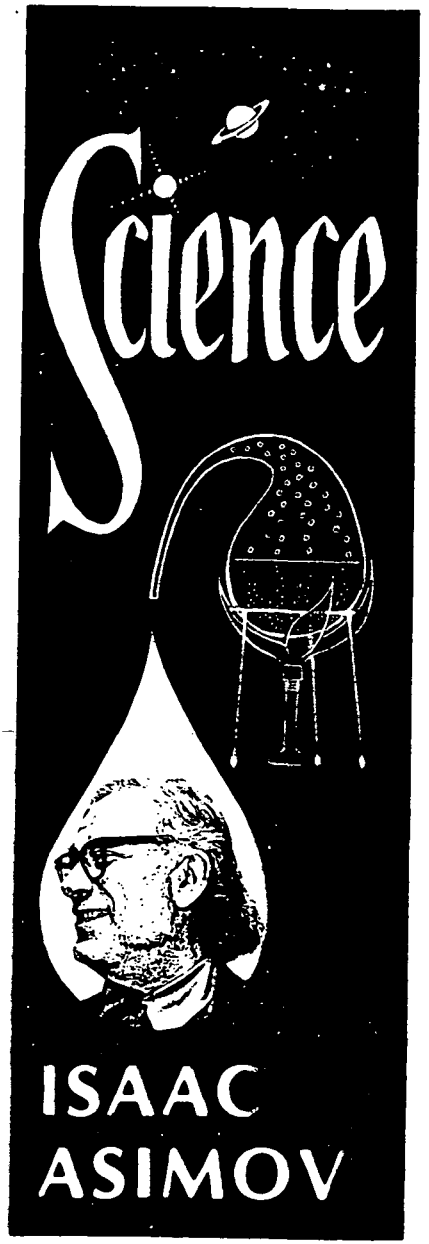

THE MOON AND WE

Sometimes I can foresee a question and I am ready for it.

For instance, some days ago I found myself involved in a long-distance debate with three other science-fiction writers. Two of them were in Sydney, Australia, getting ready to attend the World Science Fiction Convention there. A third was in Auckland, New Zealand, on his way to the same convention. And I was in New York because I don't travel.

The debate was on Reagan's "Star Wars." Two of the writers were for it, and two were against it. I was one of those against.

I went to a studio here in New York, and at 7 P.M. they began to set up the three-way hook-up between New York, Sydney and Auckland, with people in London helping out. It took a while.

Ordinarily I quickly get impatient and begin snarling at such delays, for each minute makes me more conscious of the fact that I am being kept away from my typewriter. This time, however, I managed to remain calm — even amused — for I was anticipating the first question.

Eventually the hook-up was established and, to my delight, the first question was handed to me.

"Mr. Asimov," said the host, "do you think Star Wars will work?"

I answered something like this: "Star Wars is going to involve compu-

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ters far more complex than any we now have, and a few other devices we haven't developed yet, and a number of processes we haven't worked out at all. When we finally do get it set up — if ever — it will be the most complicated system we have ever worked with, and there will be no chance to test it under field conditions until such time as the Soviet Union chooses to launch a mass nuclear attack. At that time, it will have to work, first time, from a cold start, with total accuracy and efficiency, or civilization may be destroyed.

"On the other hand, we've had radio for eighty years, and communications satellites for twenty-five years, and when it came to setting up a hook-up with these old, well established items, it took you thirty-five minutes of fiddling. Honestly, then, do *you* think Star Wars will work, and are you willing to risk the world on it?"

Although I don't like participating in debates, I must admit that I enjoyed that moment.

There are also times, however, when I *don't* anticipate questions, and the subject of this arose out of one that struck me totally by surprise. It came about this way—

I write an editorial for each issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* on some subject of science fictional interest.

In the May 1985 issue, I wrote one called "Moonshine" that was inspired by the movies I have seen in which men turn into wolves or take up some form of violent, aberrant behavior on the night of the full Moon. The implication is that there is something about the light of the full Moon that exerts a weird influence on the human body. (Of course, the Moon is full only once a month, but in these pictures, the full Moon appears every other day, on the same principle whereby a six-shooter in the average Western movie pumps out thirty-seven bullets without reloading.)

On a more "scientific" note, however, people are constantly reporting that the rates of murder, suicide, and violent crime in general go up with the full Moon, and, again, the implication is that there is something eerie about the light at that time.

In my editorial, then, I speculated on the possibility that there might truly be some rational explanation for periodic changes in human behavior with the changing of the phases of the Moon.

Surely, no sensible person can believe that moonlight itself can seriously affect human beings. It is, after all, merely reflected sunlight that

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is somewhat polarized. And even if moonlight had some effect, why should the light of the full Moon have some effect while that of the first quarter or third quarter, or even the light of the Moon one day after full or one day before full, has none. I suppose no one will maintain, seriously, that moonlight on the one night of the full Moon is so different from other moonlight that it will turn a man into a wolf. For myself, I don't see how such a light would directly influence human behavior in any marked way.

Of course, a person might argue that the effect of moonlight is indirect. On the night of the full Moon, the night is much more illuminated than at other times, and this encourages nocturnal activity and, therefore, night crime. But consider this:

1) The night is pretty well illuminated during the entire week of the full Moon. It is not much brighter on the actual night of the full Moon than on the night before or the night after. Why all this fuss about the actual night of the full Moon, then?

2) The sky is often cloudy, and the night may be very dark even at the time of the full Moon. Do all the peculiar events that seem to be associated with the full Moon take place only when the nights are clear? I haven't heard anything like this.

But a person might argue that I haven't studied this "Moon effect" in detail. They may claim that the crime level and other peculiar behavior *does* rise and fall slowly with the level of night illumination and that it *is* more marked when the sky is clear than when it is cloudy. I doubt this, but let's concede it and move on to the next point.

3) People who make a fuss about the phases of the Moon and think that the level of Lunar night illumination is of importance are living, at best, in the world of a century ago. We are now living in the era of artificial illumination. Night after night, American cities are so bright that astronomers are going out of their minds in their search for darkness in which to practice their calling. What ordinary person knows what the phases of the Moon are these days or cares? Moonlight, whether full, part-full, or none, makes no difference to the total light level in any reasonably inhabited locality these days.

It may be, though, that a person might argue that the influence of the Moon is more subtle than that involved in its light. The Moon effect may depend upon something that is not competed with by the artificial lighting, and that goes right through any clouds that might exist, and that is at a sharp maximum at the time the Moon is full.

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That's a lot to ask, but, as it happens, the Moon *does* exert an effect on the Earth that is quite independent of its light, that is not competed with by anything Earthly, and that does indeed pass right through clouds or any other conceivable barrier. It is not a particularly arcane force, however; it is the Moon's gravitational pull.

As a result of its gravitational field, the Moon exerts a tidal effect on the Earth. The tide is low at moonrise and moonset. It is high when the Moon is half way between setting and rising; whether it is crossing the meridian high in the sky or it is as far below the Earth as it can get, on the anti-meridian on the other side of the celestial sphere.

What's more the high tide is higher than usual, or lower than usual, with the changing relative position of the Moon and Sun, since the Sun's gravitational pull also creates tides (though lesser ones than the Moon's does). This means that high tides are higher or lower with the changing phases of the Moon since that also depends on the relative positions of the Moon and Sun.

At full Moon and new Moon, the Moon and Sun pull along the same line, and the high tides are then at their highest and the low tides at their lowest. When the Moon is at the first quarter or third quarter, the Moon and Sun are pulling at right angles to each other, and the high tides are then at their least high and the low tides at their least low.

In other words, there are two tidal cycles. One is a simple up-and-down cycle that repeats itself every half-day. Another is a slower rise and fall of the high and low tides themselves and that completes its period in about a month.

The question, then, is whether either of these tidal rhythms can have any effect on human behavior? If there is, the effect certainly isn't one that makes itself consciously felt. Can you tell when high tide or low tide is by the way you feel?

Of course, it may be that the tidal rhythms affect us in ways we can't ordinarily detect. It may affect the hormonal balance in our blood and give us a greater tendency to nightmares, or to irrational rages, or to profound depressions, at certain phases of the Moon.

But how would the tidal rhythm do this? There might be a tendency to speak of unknown forces or influences — but that way lies mumbo-jumbo.

To this you might reply, "Nonsense! There was a time, prior to 1801, when ultraviolet light was unknown. Yet it could give you sunburn even in 25,000 B.C."

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Suppose a Cro-magnon man of 25,000 B.C. had said, "I got sunburned through the action of an indetectable component of Sunlight." Would that be mumbo-jumbo, or would it be a case of remarkable insight?

Well, before you vote for insight, remember that that same Cro-magnon man could just as easily have said, "I should be made leader of the tribe because an indetectable component of sunlight is filling me with special charisma and divine power that the rest of you don't have."

In other words, if you deal with some unknown, undetected force, you can make it responsible for anything at all, and there would be no way of telling whether some particular statement you make about it is true or false. In fact, since there are many more potentially false statements than potentially true ones (as, for instance, 2 + 2 has one correct answer and an infinite number of wrong answers, even if we confine ourselves to integers), then anything we say about something we know nothing about is almost certain to be wrong.

To hide behind the unknown, then, is virtually certain to lead us astray, and we cannot do that and still be playing the game of science.

But people might say, "We're not talking about an unknown force. We're talking about tidal effect. The tides make themselves felt in the ocean, which is a vast solution of salt water. Human tissue is made up mostly of salt water. Naturally, the tides affect us the way they affect the ocean, so that when we're talking about the full Moon, we're talking about high tide in the human body."

The tides are just as high at new Moon, but somehow it's always full Moon people talk about. Still, forget that for a moment, and let's make another point.

The tidal effect is felt by the entire Earth. There are tides in the atmosphere and in the solid outer layers of the Earth as well as in the ocean. It just happens that the ocean tides are more noticeable to casual observation. We therefore can't blame anything on the watery nature of human tissue.

Whereupon you might say, "That doesn't matter. If the tides affect the entire human body, that's all the better."

Let's make another and more important point, then.

The tidal effect is produced by the fact that the gravitational pull is not the same everywhere. It varies in intensity with the square of the distance from the body exerting the pull. The side of the Earth nearest the Moon feels the pull more strongly than the side of the Earth away

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from the Moon. The far side, after all, is 12,756 kilometers further from the Moon than the near side is. The Earth is stretched by this difference in pull, and that produces the small bulges on either side, toward and away from the Moon, and these are the tides.

If we were dealing with a body smaller than the Earth, the difference in the distance from the Moon of the near side and the far side would be smaller, and the tidal effect would be smaller, too, by the square of the extent of the difference in size.

A human being standing upright under the Moon, when it is high in the sky, would have his feet about 1.8 meters farther from the Moon than his head is. That means the Earth is just over 7,000,000 times as thick as a human being. Square that and what we are saying is that the Moon's tidal effect on a human being is about 1/50,000,000,000,000th (or fifty-trillionth) that on the Earth.

Can such an infra-tiny tidal effect produce any noticeable difference in behavior in a human being?

Well, searching for *something*, here is what I said in my editorial:

". . .it is certain they (the tide cycles) affect creatures who spend their lives at or near the sea-shore. The ebb and flow of the tide must be intimately involved with the rhythm of their lives. Thus, the time of highest tide may be the appropriate occasion to lay eggs, for instance. The behavior of such creatures therefore seems to be related to the phases of the Moon. That is not mysterious if you consider the Moon-tide-behavior connection. If, however, you leave out the intermediate step and consider only a Moon/behavior connection, you change a rational view into a semi-mystical one.

"But what connection can there be between worms and fish living at the edge of the sea, and human beings?

"Surely there is an evolutionary connection. We may consider ourselves far removed from tidal creatures *now* but we are descended from organisms that, 400 million years ago, were probably living at the sea-land interface and were intimately affected by tidal rhythms.

"Yes, but that was 400 million years ago. Can we argue that the tidal rhythms of those days would affect us now? It doesn't seem likely, but it is a conceivable possibility.

"After all . . . . we still have a few bones at the bottom end of our spine that represent all that is left of a tail that our ancestors haven't had for at least 20 million years. We have an appendix that is the remnant of

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an organ that hasn't been used for even longer. . . .

"Why should there not also be vestigial remnants of ancestral biochemical or psychological properties? In particular, why should we not retain some aspects of the old tidal rhythms. . . ."

In this way, I built up an argument that tidal rhythms might affect us as vestigial remnants of behavior dating back to ancestors for whom they were life and death. That, however, only supplies a rational skeleton upon which to hang this business of the "Moon effect." We have to make hard and fast observations about, for instance, the rise and fall of hormonal concentrations with the tides and demonstrate just how this may affect behavior. Without that, all we have is anecdotal evidence, which is notably untrustworthy.

In my editorial, I thought I had taken up the matter in careful and objective detail (as I have here — even more carefully and objectively), but then I got letters of a kind I had never expected asking a question that caught me completely by surprise.

Why, those letters asked, did I neglect to mention the obvious connection between the Moon and menstruation?

What's more, the tone of those letters (all from women, by the way) was personally horrifying. They definitely seemed to think that I had a sexist motive in not discussing the matter; that I simply thought that since menstruation was a phenomenon of females exclusively, I dismissed it as not worth mentioning. More than one letter accused of me of "forgetting" 51 percent of the human race.

Why didn't I mention menstruation, then? Simply because it never occurred to me that anyone who thought about it at all would connect it with the Moon.

To be sure, the menstrual cycle in human females does indeed seem to be about the length of the cycle of the phases of the Moon. The correspondence is noticeable enough so that the word "menstruation" is from the Latin "mensis," meaning "month." But of what value is that? We call native Americans "Indians" because Columbus thought that he had reached the Indies, but the fact that that is what we call them is no evidence that the United States is part of India.

In this connection, consider that of all animals, only the primates menstruate. The menstrual period varies considerably among the various species of primates, so that human beings are one of, at best, very few species that have a menstrual period that is about a month long. If

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we want to blame that period on the Moon, we're going to have to explain why the Moon's influence is so finely focused. Why does the Moon pick on human beings to the almost total exclusion of all other species?

Then, too, when particular species are affected by some cycle, all the individuals react in about the same way. When one tree of a particular species in a particular region begins to put out leaves in the spring, all the others do so at about the same time. When one swallow returns to Capistrano, so do all the others.

We might expect, then, that being affected by the phases of the Moon, either through tidal rhythms, or in some other way, all women would experience the onset of menstruation at some particular Lunar phase. This, however, is not so. There isn't a day in the year when a little under four percent of women of the proper age and condition don't experience the onset of menstruation. The phase of the Moon doesn't matter.

To be sure, I've heard that if a group of women are kept in close quarters, their periods tend to begin to match and fall in step. Presumably, they affect one another. Perhaps there is a subtle menstrual odor that tends to stimulate onset. But even so, if it does happen, I've never heard that the matching onsets always come at some particular phase of the Moon. They can line up at *any* phase, apparently.

In that case, we might argue, it isn't the details of the period that have anything to do with the Moon. It is merely the *length* of the period that has something to do with the Moon.

To be sure, I'm a male and have no personal experience of the menstrual period, but I'm reasonably observant and I'm well aware that women are always being surprised by a period beginning a day, or two, or three earlier or later than usual.

In short, I'm afraid that the length of the menstrual period is quite irregular in a Universe in which the cycle of the Moon's phases is very regular.

But I can hear someone say, "Never mind the irregularities. The *average* length of the menstrual period is 28 days, and that's the length of the cycle of the Moon's phases, and therefore of the tidal rhythms."

Well, I'm sorry, but that is not the length of the cycle of the Moon's phases, and I will explain why.

The Moon revolves about the Earth (relative to the stars) in

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27.3216614 days, or 27 days 7 hours 43 minutes 11.5 seconds. We can call it 27 1/3 days without being too far off at all. This is called the "sidereal month," from a Latin word for "constellation" or "star."

The sidereal month is, however, only of interest to astronomers, for it has nothing to do with the phases of the Moon, and it is by the cycle of the phases that ancient peoples defined the month.

The phases depend on the relative positions of the Moon and the Sun. It is the period from new Moon to new Moon, when the Sun and Moon are as close as possible in the sky so that the Sun and Moon both cross the meridian at noon; or from full Moon to full Moon, when Sun and Moon are indirectly opposite positions in the sky so that the Sun crosses the meridian at noon while the Moon crosses it at midnight.

To find this period we have to imagine the Moon starting with the Sun and moving around the sky till it is back at the Sun (new Moon to new Moon). But since the Moon circles the Earth in 27 1/3 days, isn't it back at the Sun in 27 1/3 days? No, it isn't, because the Sun isn't standing still.

The Earth revolves about the Sun in 365.2422 days and that causes the sun to seem to move west-to-east across the sky. If the Moon starts with the Sun and moves west-to-east, returning to the same spot (relative to the stars) 27 1/3 days later, the Sun has moved somewhat eastward in that period and the Moon must spend extra time catching up to the Sun in order to be at new Moon again. This extra time turns out to be about 2 1/5 days, so that the average period from new Moon to new Moon is 29.5305882 days, or 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes 2.8 seconds. We can call it 29½ days and not be very far wrong.

The 29½ days period is called the "synodic month" from a Greek word for a religious gathering, because it was usually left to the priests to decide when the new Moon took place so that the new month could begin at the proper time and with the proper ritual.

The menstrual period is 28 days long, then, while the period of the phases of the Moon is 29½ days long. Isn't that close enough? They're almost equal.

No, it isn't close enough. If the Moon's phases and the tidal rhythm have some connection with the menstrual rhythm, then the two rhythms ought to match — and they don't.

Suppose that someone with a perfectly regular menstrual period and with a perfectly average length of period experiences the onset of that period on a certain day on which the full Moon shines down on the Earth. If there is any meaning to the myth of the Moon's connection

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with the menstrual period, then the next onset should be at the time of the next full Moon and the one after that at the time of the full Moon after that, and so on and so on indefinitely.

But that doesn't happen! A perfectly regular period of perfectly average length will experience the next onset 1½ days before the full Moon, and the one after that 3 days before the full Moon, and the one after that 4½ days before the full Moon.

Gradually, a woman will experience onset at slightly different phases of the Moon as she works her way through the cycle of phases in a little less than 20 menstrual cycles, and even so the 20th cycle won't start exactly on the day of the full Moon either.

Fifty-nine successive perfectly regular menstrual periods will take 1652 days (or a little over 4½ years). Fifty-six synodic months will also take 1652 days. Those are the smallest numbers of the two cycles that match each other. That means that, counting from a first onset that takes place on the night of the full Moon, it will not be until the 59th onset, four and a half years later, that the full Moon will shine in the sky again.

On the whole, then, no matter how you slice it, the Moon and menstruation have no significant connection in any way.

But then, how do I explain the fact that the menstrual period is so close to the length of the synodic month, if the Moon is not involved?

Well, there *is* an explanation for that, but it is a very undramatic one and many people may not be able to bring themselves to accept it. It's called "coincidence."

I wonder, now, whether this view will offend some women who read this essay. Is there any reason why they should *want* there to be a connection between their bodily processes and the Moon?

Perhaps there is. Perhaps it gives them a feeling of importance to imagine a connection with the Moon that men don't have.

However, that's a non-existent connection, and it's my own opinion that women are quite wonderful enough in their own right to require no support from a superstitious illusion.

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Damon Knight's fine new tale concerns a professor who travels to a planet called Paradise in search of material for a biography but who uncovers quite a different and chilling story.

Strangers In Paradise

BY
DAMON KNIGHT

Paradise was the name of the planet. Once it had been called something else, but nobody knew what.

From this distance, it was a warm blue cloud-speckled globe turning in darkness. Selby viewed it in a holotube, not directly, because there was no porthole in the isolation room, but he thought he knew how the first settlers had felt ninety years ago, seeing it for the first time after their long voyage. He felt much the same way himself; he had been in medical isolation on the entryport satellite for three months, waiting to get to the place he had dreamed of with hopeless longing all his life: a place without disease, without violence, a world that had never known the sin of Cain.

Selby (Howard W., Ph.D.) was a slender, balding man in his forties, an Irishman, a reformed drunkard, an unsuccessful poet, a professor of English literature at the University of Toronto. One of his particular interests was the work of Eleanor Petryk, the expatriate lyric poet who had lived on Paradise for thirty years, the last ten of them silent. After Petryk's death in 2106, he had applied for a grant from the International Endowment to write a definitive critical biography of Petryk, and in two years of negotiation he had succeeded in gaining entry to Paradise. It was, he knew, going to be the peak experience of his life.

The Paradisans had pumped out his blood and replaced it with something that, they assured him, was just as efficient at carrying oxygen but was not an appetizing medium for microbes. They had taken samples of his body fluids and snippets of his flesh from here and there. He had been scanned by a dozen machines, and they had given him injections for

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twenty diseases and parasites they said he was carrying. Their faces, in the holotubes, had smiled pityingly when he told them he had had a clean bill of health when he was checked out in Houston.

It was like being in a hospital, except that only machines touched him, and he saw human faces only in the holotube. He had spent the time reading and watching canned information films of happy, healthy people working and playing in the golden sunlight. Their faces were smooth, their eyes bright. The burden of the films was always the same: how happy the Paradisans were, how fulfilling their lives, how proud of the world they were building.

The books were a little more informative. The planet had two large continents, one inhabited, the other desert (although from space it looked much like the other), plus a few rocky, uninhabitable island chains. The axial tilt was seven degrees. The seasons were mild. The planet was geologically inactive; there were no volcanoes, and earthquakes were unknown. The low, rounded hills offered no impediment to the global circulation of air. The soil was rich. And there was no disease.

This morning, after his hospital breakfast of orange juice, oatmeal, and toast, they had told him he would be released at noon. And that was like a hospital, too; it was almost two o'clock now, and he was still here.

"Mr. Selby."

He turned, saw the woman's smiling face in the holotube. "Yes?"

"We are ready for you now. Will you walk into the anteroom?"

"With the greatest of pleasure."

The door swung open. Selby entered; the door closed behind him. The clothes he had been wearing when he arrived were on a rack; they were newly cleaned and, doubtless, disinfected. Watched by an eye on the wall, he took off his pajamas and dressed. He felt like an invalid after a long illness; the shoes and belt were unfamiliar objects.

The outer door opened. Beyond stood the nurse in her green cap and bright smile; behind her was a man in a yellow jumpsuit.

"Mr. Selby, I'm John Ledbitter. I'll be taking you groundside as soon as you're thumbed out."

There were three forms to thumbprint, with multiple copies. "Thank you, Mr. Selby," said the nurse. "It's been a pleasure to have you with us. We hope you will enjoy your stay on Paradise."

"Thank you."

"Please." That was what they said instead of "You're welcome"; it was short for "Please don't mention it," but it was hard to get used to.

"This way." He followed Ledbitter down a long corridor in which they met no one. They got into an elevator. "Hang on, please." Selby put his arms through the straps. The elevator

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fell away; when it stopped, they were floating, weightless.

Ledbitter took his arm to help him out of the elevator. Alarm bells were ringing somewhere. "This way." They pulled themselves along a cord to the jump box, a cubicle as big as Selby's hospital room. "Please lie down here."

They lay side by side on narrow cots. Ledbitter put up the padded rails. "Legs and arms apart, please, head straight. Make sure you are comfortable. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Ledbitter opened the control box by his side, watching the instruments in the ceiling. "On my three," he said. "One . . . two . . ."

Selby felt a sudden increase in weight as the satellite accelerated to match the speed of the planetary surface. After a long time the control lights blinked; the cot sprang up against him. They were on Paradise.

The jump boxes, more properly Henderson-Rosenberg devices, had made interplanetary and interstellar travel amost instantaneous — not quite, because vectors at sending and receiving stations had to be matched, but near enough. The hitch was that you couldn't get anywhere by jump box unless someone had been there before and brought a receiving station. That meant that interstellar exploration had to proceed by conventional means: the Taylor Drive at first, then impulse engines; round trips, even to nearby stars, took twenty years or more. Paradise, colonized ninety years ago by a Geneite sect from the United States, had been the first Earthlike planet to be discovered; it was still the only one, and it was off-limits to Earthlings except on special occasions. There was not much the governments of Earth could do about that.

A uniformed woman, who said she had been assigned as his guide, took him in tow. Her name was Helga Sonnstein. She was magnificently built, clear-skinned and rosy, like all the other Paradisans he had seen so far.

They walked to the hotel on clean streets, under monorails that swooped gracefully overhead. The passersby were beautifully dressed; some of them glanced curiously at Selby. The air was so pure and fresh that simply breathing was a pleasure. The sky over the white buildings was a robin's-egg blue. The disorientation Selby felt was somehow less than he had expected.

In his room, he looked up Karen McMorrow's code. Her face in the holotube was pleasant, but she did not smile. "Welcome to Paradise, Mr. Selby. Are you enjoying your visit?"

"Very much, so far."

"Can you tell me when you would like to come to the Cottage?"

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"Whenever it's convenient for you, Miss McMorrow."

"Unfortunately, there is some family business I must take care of. In two or three days?"

"That will be perfectly fine. I have some other people to interview, and I'd like to see something of the city while I'm here."

"Until later, then. I'm sorry for this delay."

"Please," said Selby.

That afternoon Miss Sonnstein took him around the city. And it was all true. The Paradisans were happy, healthy, energetic, and cheerful. He had never seen so many unlined faces, so many clear eyes and bright smiles. Even the patients in the hospital looked healthy. They were accident victims for the most part — broken legs, cuts. He was just beginning to understand what it was like to live on a world where there was no infectious disease and never had been.

He liked the Paradisans — they were immensely friendly, warm, outgoing people. It was impossible not to like them. And at the same time he envied and resented them. He understood why, but he couldn't stop.

On his second day he talked to Petryk's editor at the state publishing house, an amiable man named Truro, who took him to lunch and gave him a handsomely bound copy of Petryk's *Collected Poems*.

During lunch — lake trout, apparently as much a delicacy here as it was in North America — Truro drew him out about his academic background, his publications, his plans for the future. "We would certainly like to publish your book about Eleanor," he said. "In fact, if it were possible, we would be even happier to publish it here first."

Selby explained his arrangements with Macmillan Schuster. Truro said, "But there's no contract yet?"

Selby, intrigued by the direction the conversation was taking, admitted that there was none.

"Well, let's see how things turn out," said Truro. Back in the office, he showed Selby photos of Petryk taken after the famous one, the only one that had appeared on Earth. She was a thin-faced woman, fragile-looking. Her hair was a little grayer, the face more lined — sadder, perhaps.

"Is there any unpublished work?" Selby asked.

"None that she wanted to preserve. She was very selective, and of course her poems sold quite well here — not as much as on Earth, but she made a comfortable living."

"What about the silence — the last ten years?"

"It was her choice. She no longer wanted to write poems. She turned to sculpture instead — wood carvings, mostly. You'll see when you go out to the Cottage."

Afterward Truro arranged for him to see Potter Hargrove, Petryk's divorced husband. Hargrove was in his

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seventies, white-haired and red-faced. He was the official in charge of what they called the New Lands Program: satellite cities were being built by teams of young volunteers — the ground cleared and sterilized, terrestrial plantings made. Hargrove had a great deal to say about this.

With some difficulty, Selby turned the conversation to Eleanor Petryk.

"How did she happen to get permission to live on Paradise, Mr. Hargrove? I've always been curious."

"It's been our policy to admit occasional immigrants, when we think they have something we lack. *Very* occasional. We don't publicize it. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, of course." Selby collected his thoughts. "What was she like, those last ten years?"

"I don't know. We were divorced five years before that. I remarried. Afterward, Eleanor became rather isolated."

When Selby stood up to leave, Hargrove said, "Have you an hour or so? I'd like to show you something."

They got into a comfortable four-seat runabout and drove north, through the commercial district, then suburban streets. Hargrove parked the runabout, and they walked down a dirt road past a cluster of farm buildings. The sky was an innocent blue; the sun was warm. An insect buzzed past Selby's ear; he turned and saw that it was a honeybee. Ahead was a field of corn.

The waves of green rolled away from them to the horizon, rippling in the wind. Every stalk, every leaf, was perfect.

"No weeds," said Selby.

Hargrove smiled with satisfaction. "That's the beautiful part," he said. "No weeds, because any Earth plant poisons the soil for them. Not only that, but no pests, rusts, blights. The native organisms are incompatible. We can't eat them, and they can't eat us."

"It seems very antiseptic," Selby said.

"Well, that may seem strange to you, but the word comes from the Greek *sepsis*, which means 'putrid'. I don't think we have to apologize for being against putrefaction. We came here without bringing any Earth diseases or parasites with us, and that means there is *nothing* that can attack us. It will take hundreds of thousands of years for the local organisms to adapt to us, if they ever do."

"And then?"

Hargrove shrugged: "Maybe we'll find another planet."

"What if there aren't any other suitable planets within reach? Wasn't it just luck that you found this one?"

"Not luck. It was God's will, Mr. Selby."

Hargrove had given him the names of four old friend of Petryk's who were still alive. After some parleying

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on the holo, Selby arranged to meet them together in the home of Mark Andrevon, a novelist well known on Paradise in the sixties. (The present year, by Paradisan reckoning, was A.L. 91.) The others were Theodore Bonwait, a painter; Alice Orr, a poet and ceramicist; and Ruth-Joan Wellman, another poet.

At the beginning of the evening, Andrevon was pugnacious about what he termed his neglect in the English-Speaking Union; he told Selby in considerable detail about his literary honors and the editions of his works. This was familiar talk to Selby; he gathered that Andrevon was now little read even here. He managed to soothe the disgruntled author and turn the conversation to Petryk's early years on Paradise.

"Poets don't actually like each other much, I'm sure you know that, Mr. Selby," said Ruth-Joan Wellman. "We got along fairly well, though — we were all young and unheard of then, and we used to get together and cook spaghetti, that sort of thing. Then Ellie got married, and . . ."

"Mr. Hargrove didn't care for her friends?"

"Something like that," said Theodore Bonwait. "Well, there were more demands on her time, too. It was a rather strong attachment at first. We saw them occasionally, at parties and openings, that sort of thing."

"What was she like then, can you tell me? What was your impression?"

They thought about it. Talented, they agreed, a little vague about practical matters ("which was why it seemed so lucky for her to marry Potter," said Alice Orr, "but it didn't work out"), very charming sometimes, but a sharp-tongued critic. Selby took notes. He got them to tell him where they had all lived, where they had met, in what years. Three of them admitted that they had some of Petryk's letters, and promised to send him copies.

After another day or so, Truro called him and asked him to come to the office. Selby felt that something was in the wind.

"Mr. Selby," Truro said, "you know visitors like yourself are so rare that we feel we have to take as much advantage of them as we can. This is a young world, we haven't paid as much attention as we might to literary and artistic matters. I wonder if you have ever thought of staying with us?"

Selby's heart gave a jolt. "Do you mean permanently?" he said. "I didn't think there was any chance—"

"Well, I've been talking to Potter Hargrove, and he thinks something might be arranged. This is all in confidence, of course, and I don't want you to make up your mind hurriedly. Think it over."

"I really don't know what to say. I'm surprised — I mean, I was sure I had offended Mr. Hargrove."

"Oh, no, he was favorably impressed.

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He likes your spice."

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't you have that expression? Your, how shall I say it, ability to stand up for yourself. He's the older generation, you know — son of a pioneer. They respect someone who speaks his mind."

Selby, out on the street, felt an incredulous joy. Of all the billions on Earth, how many would ever be offered such a prize?

Later, with Helga Sonnstein, he visited an elementary school. "Did you ever have a cold?" a serious eight-year-old girl asked him.

"Yes, many times."

"What was it like?"

"Well, your nose runs, you cough and sneeze a lot, and your head feels stuffy. Sometimes you have a little fever, and your bones ache."

"That's *awful*," she said, and her small face expressed something between commiseration and disbelief.

Well, it *was* awful, and a cold was the least of it — "no worse than a bad cold," people used to say about syphilis. Thank God she had not asked about that.

He felt healthy himself, and in fact he was healthy — even before the Paradisan treatments, he had always considered himself healthy. But his medical history, he knew, would have looked like a catalog of horrors to these people — influenza, mumps, cerebrospinal meningitis once, various rashes, dysentery several times (something you had to expect if you traveled). You took it for granted — all those swellings and oozings — it was part of the game. What would it be like to go back to that now?

Miss Sonnstein took him to the university, introduced him to several people, and left him there for the afternoon. Selby talked to the head of the English department, a vaguely hearty man named Quincy; nothing was said to suggest that he might be offered a job if he decided to remain, but Selby's instinct told him that he was being inspected with that end in view.

Afterward he visited the natural history museum and talked to a professor named Morrison who was a specialist in native life-forms.

The plants and animals of Paradise were unlike anything on Earth. The "trees" were scaly, bulbous-bottomed things, some with lacy fronds waving sixty feet overhead, others with cup-shaped leaves that tilted individually to follow the sun. There were no large predators, Morrison assured him; it would be perfectly safe to go into the boonies, providing he did not run out of food. There were slender, active animals with bucket-shaped noses climbing in the forests or burrowing in the ground, and there were things that were not exactly insects; one species had a fixed wing like a maple seedpod — it spiraled down from the treetops, eating other

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airborne creatures on the way, and then climbed up again.

Of the dominant species, the aborigines, Morrison's department had only bones, not even reconstructions. They had been upright, about five feet tall, large-skulled, possibly mammalian. The eyeholes of their skulls were canted. The bones of their feet were peculiar, bent like the footbones of horses or cattle. "I wonder what they looked like," Selby said.

Morrison smiled. He was a little man with a brushy black mustache. "Not very attractive, I'm afraid. We do have their stone carvings, and some wall pictures and inscriptions." He showed Selby an album of photographs. The carvings, of what looked like weathered granite, showed angular creatures with blunt muzzles. The paintings were the same, but the expression of the eyes was startlingly human. Around some of the paintings were columns of written characters that looked like clusters of tiny hoofprints.

"You can't translate these?"

"Not without a Rosetta stone. That's the pity of it — if only we'd got here just a little earlier."

"How long ago did they die off?"

"Probably not more than a few centuries. We find their skeletons buried in the trunks of trees. Very well preserved. About what happened there are various theories. The likeliest thing is plague, but some people think there was a climatic change."

Then Selby saw the genetics laboratory. They were working on some alterations in the immune system, they said, which they hoped in thirty years would make it possible to abandon the allergy treatments that all children now got from the cradle up. "Here's something else that's quite interesting," said the head of the department, a blonde woman named Reynolds. She showed him white rabbits in a row of cages. Sunlight came through the open door; beyond was a loading dock, where a man with a Y-lift was hoisting up a bale of feed.

"These are Lyman Whites, a standard strain," said Miss Reynolds. "Do you notice anything unusual about them?"

"They look very healthy," said Selby.

"Nothing else?"

"No."

She smiled. "These rabbits were bred from genetic material spliced with bits of DNA from native organisms. The object was to see if we could enable them to digest native proteins. That has been only partly successful, but something completely unexpected happened. We seem to have interrupted a series of cues that turns on the aging process. The rabbits do not age past maturity. This pair, and those in the next cage, are twenty-one years old."

"Immortal rabbits?"

"No, we can't say that. All we can say is that they have lived twenty-one

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years. That is three times their normal span. Let's see what happens in another fifty or a hundred years."

As they left the room, Selby asked, "Are you thinking of applying this dicovery to human beings?"

"It has been discussed. We don't know enough yet. We have tried to replicate the effect in rhesus monkeys, but so far without success."

"If you should find that this procedure is possible in human beings, do you think it would be wise?"

She stopped and faced him. "Yes, why not? If you are miserable and ill, I can understand why you would not want to live a long time. But if you are happy and productive, why not? Why should people have to grow old and die?"

She seemed to want his approval. Selby said, "But, if nobody ever died, you'd have to stop having children. The world wouldn't be big enough."

She smiled again. "This is a very big world, Mr. Selby."

Selby had seen in Claire Reynolds's eyes a certain guarded interest; he had seen it before in Paradisan women, including Helga Sonnstein. He did not know how to account for it. He was shorter than the average Paradisan male, not as robust; he had had to be purged of a dozen or two loathsome diseases before he could set foot on Paradise. Perhaps that was it: perhaps he was interesting to women because he was unlike all the other men they knew.

He called the next day and asked Miss Reynolds to dinner. Her face in the tube looked surprised, then pleased. "Yes, that would be very nice," she said.

An hour later he had a call from Karen McMorrow; she was free now to welcome him to the Cottage, and would be glad to see him that afternoon. Selby recognized the workings of that law of the universe that tends to bring about a desired result at the least convenient time; he called the laboratory, left a message of regret, and boarded the intercity tube for the town where Eleanor Petryk had lived and died.

The tube, a transparent cylinder suspended from pylons, ran up and over the rolling hills. The crystal windows were open; sweet flower scents drifted in, and behind them darker smells, unfamiliar and disturbing. Selby felt a thrill of excitement when he realized that he was looking at the countryside with new eyes, not as a tourist but as someone who might make this strange land his home.

They passed mile after mile of growing crops — corn, soybeans, then acres of beans, squash, peas; then fallow fields and grazing land in which the traceries of buried ruins could be seen.

After a while the cultivated fields began to thin out, and Selby saw the boonies for the first time. The tall fronded plants looked like anachronisms from the Carboniferous. The

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forests stopped at the borders of the fields as if they had been cut with a knife.

Provo was now a town of about a hundred thousand; when Eleanor Petryk had first lived there, it had been only a crossroads at the edge of the boonies. Selby got off the tube in late afternoon. A woman in blue stepped forward. "Mr. Selby."

"Yes,"

"I'm Karen McMorrow. Was your trip pleasant?"

"Very pleasant."

She was a little older than she had looked on the holotube, in her late fifties, perhaps. "Come with me, please." No monorails here; she had a little impulse-powered runabout. They swung off the main street onto a blacktop road that ran between rows of tall maples.

"You were Miss Petryk's companion during her later years?"

"Secretary. Amanuensis." She smiled briefly.

"Did she have many friends in Provo?"

"No. None. She was a very private person. Here we are." She stopped the runabout; they were in a narrow lane with hollyhocks on either side.

The house was a low white-painted wooden building half-hidden by evergreens. Miss McMorrow opened the door and ushered him in. There was a cool, stale odor, the smell of a house unlived in.

The sitting room was dominated by a massive coffee table apparently carved from the cross section of a tree. In the middle of it, in a hollow space, was a stone bowl, and in the bowl, three carved bones.

"Is this native wood?" Selby asked, stooping to run his hand over the polished grain.

"Yes. Redwood, we call it, but it is nothing like the Earth tree. It is not really a tree at all. This was the first piece she carved; there are others in the workroom, through there."

The workroom, a shed attached to the house, was cluttered with wood carvings, some taller than Selby, others small enough to be held in the palm of the hand. The larger ones were curiously tormented shapes, half human and half tree. The smaller ones were animals and children.

"We knew nothing about this," Selby said. "Only that she had gone silent. She never explained?"

"It was her choice."

They went into Petryk's study. Books were in glass-fronted cases, and there were shelves of books and record cubes. A vase with sprays of cherry blossoms was on a windowsill.

"This is where she wrote?"

"Yes. Always in longhand, here, at the table. She wrote in pencil, on yellow paper. She said poems could not be made on machines."

"And all her papers are here?"

"Yes, in these cabinets. Thirty years of work. You will want to look through them?"

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"Yes. I'm very grateful."

"Let me show you first where you will eat and sleep, then you can begin. I will come out once a day to see how you are getting on."

On the cabinets were thousands of pages of manuscript — treasures, including ten drafts of the famous poem *Walking the River*. Selby went through them methodically one by one, making copious notes. He worked until he could not see the pages, and fell into bed exhausted every night.

On the third day, Miss McMorrow took him on a trip into the boonies. Dark scents were all around them. The dirt road, such as it was, ended after half a mile; then they walked. "Eleanor often came out here, camping," she said. "Sometimes for a week or more. She liked the solitude." In the gloom of the tall shapes that were not trees, the ground was covered with not-grass and not-ferns. The silence was deep. Faint trails ran off in both directions. "Are these animal runs?" Selby asked.

"No. She made them. They are growing back now. There are no large animals on Paradise."

"I haven't even seen any small ones."

Through the undergrowth he glimpsed a mound of stone on a hill. "What is that?"

"Aborigine ruins. They are all through the boonies."

She followed him as he climbed up to it. The cut stones formed a complex hundreds of yards across. Selby stooped to peer through a doorway. The aborigines had been a small people.

At one corner of the ruins was a toppled stone figure, thirty feet long. The weeds had grown over it, but he could see that the face had been broken away, as if by blows of a hammer.

"What they could have taught us," Selby said.

"What could they have taught us?"

"What it is to be human, perhaps."

"I think we have to decide that for ourselves."

Six weeks went by. Selby was conscious that he now knew more about Eleanor Petryk than anyone on Earth, and also that he did not understand her at all. In the evenings he sometimes went into the workroom and looked at the tormented carved figures. Obviously she had turned to them because she had to do something, and because she could no longer write. But why the silence?

Toward the end, at the back of the last cabinet, Selby found a curious poem.

XC

Tremble at the coming of the light,
Hear the rings rustle on the trees.
Every creature runs away in fright;

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Years will pass before the end of night;
Woe to them who drift upon the seas.
Erebus above hears not their pleas;
Repentance he has none upon his height—
Earth will always take what she can seize.

Knights of the sky, throw down your shining spears.
In luxury enjoy your stolen prize.
Let those who will respond to what I write,
Lest all of us forget to count the years.
Empty are the voices, and the eyes
Dead in the coming of that night.

Selby looked at it in puzzlement. It was a sonnet, of sorts, a form that had lapsed into obscurity centuries ago, and one that, to his knowledge, Petryk had never used before in her life. What was more curious was that it was an awkward poem, almost a jingle. Petryk could not possibly have been guilty of it, and yet here it was in her handwriting.

With a sudden thrill of understanding, he looked at the initial letters of the lines. The poem was an acrostic, another forgotten form. It concealed a message, and that was why the poem was awkward — deliberately so, perhaps.

He read the poem again. Its meaning was incredible but clear. They had bombed the planet — probably the other continent, the one that was said to be covered with desert. No doubt it was, now. Blast and radiation would have done for any aborigines there, and a brief nuclear winter would have taken care of the rest. And the title, "XC" — Roman numerals, another forgotten art. Ninety years.

In his anguish, there was one curious phrase that he still did not understand — "Hear the rings rustle," where the expected word was "leaves." Why rings?

Suddenly he thought he knew. He went into the other room and looked at the coffee table. In the hollow, the stone bowl with its carved bones. Around it, the rings. There was a scar where the tree had been cut into, hollowed out; but it had been a big tree even then. He counted the rings outside the scar: the first one was narrow, almost invisible, but it was there. Altogether there were ninety.

The natives had buried their dead in chambers cut from the wood of living trees. Petryk must have found this one on one of her expeditions. And she had left the evidence here, where anyone could see it.

That night Selby thought of Eleanor Petryk, lying sleepless in this house. What could one do with such knowledge? Her answer had been silence: ten years of silence, until she died. But she had left the message behind her, because she could not

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bear the silence. He cursed her for her frailty; had she never guessed what a burden she had laid on the man who was to read her message, the man who by sheer perverse bad fortune was himself?

In the morning he called Miss McMorrow and told her he was ready to leave. She said good-bye to him at the tube, and he rode back to the city, looking out with bitter hatred at the scars the aborigines had left in the valleys.

He made the rounds to say good-bye to the people he had met. At the genetics laboratory, a pleasant young man told him that Miss Reynolds was not in. "She may have left for the weekend, but I'm not sure. If you'll wait here a few minutes, I'll see if I can find out."

It was a fine day, and the back door was open. Outside stood an impulse-powered pickup, empty.

Selby looked at the rabbits in their cages. He was thinking of something he had run across in one of Eleanor Petryk's old books, a work on mathematics. "Fibonacci numbers were invented by the thirteenth-century Italian mathematician to furnish a model of population growth in rabbits. His assumptions were: 1) it takes rabbits one month from birth to reach maturity; 2) one month after reaching maturity, and every month thereafter, each pair of rabbits will produce another pair of rabbits; and 3) rabbits never die."

As if in a dream, Selby unlatched the cages and took out two rabbits, one a buck, the other a doe heavy with young. He put them under his arms, warm and quivering. He got into the pickup with them and drove northward, past the fields of corn, until he reached the edge of the cultivated land. He walked through the undergrowth to a clearing where tender shoots grew. He put the rabbits down. They snuffed around suspiciously. One hopped, then the other. Presently they were out of sight.

Selby felt as if his blood were fizzing; he was elated and horrified all at once. He drove the pickup to the highway and parked it just outside town. Now he was frozen and did not feel anything at all.

From the hotel he made arrangements for his departure. Miss Sonnstein accompanied him to the jump terminal. "Good-bye, Mr. Selby. I hope you have had a pleasant visit."

"It has been most enlightening, thank you."

"Please," she said.

It was raining in Houston, where Selby bought, for sentimental reasons, a bottle of Old Space Ranger. The shuttle was crowded and smelly; three people were coughing as if their lungs would burst. Black snow was falling in Toronto. Selby let himself into his apartment, feeling as if he had never been away. He got the bottle out of his luggage, filled a glass, and sat for a while looking at it. His notes and the

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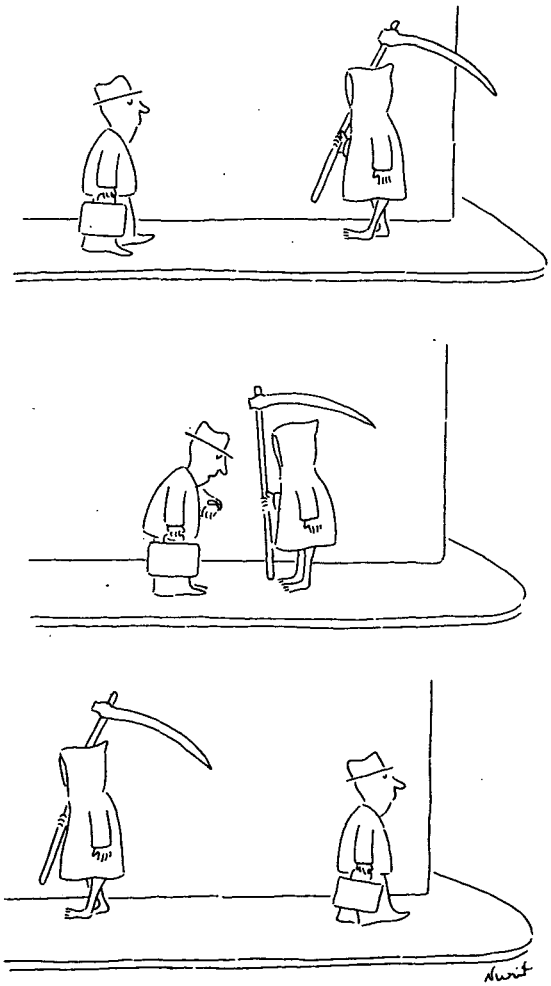
copies of Petryk's papers were in his suitcase, monuments to a book that he now knew would never be written. The doggerel of "XC" ran through his head. Two lines of it, actually, were not so bad:

Empty are the voices, and the eyes
Dead in the coming of that night.



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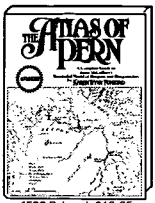

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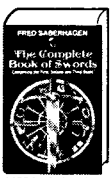

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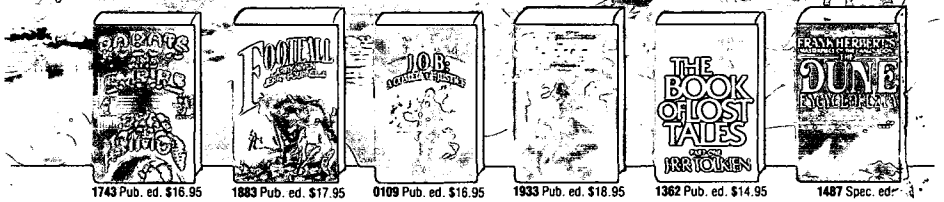

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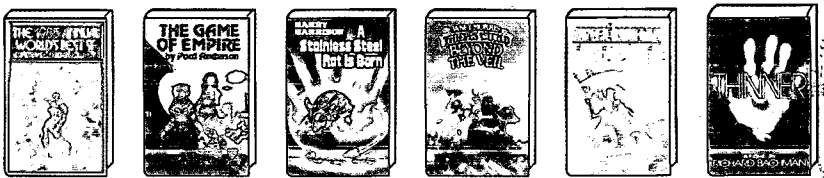

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